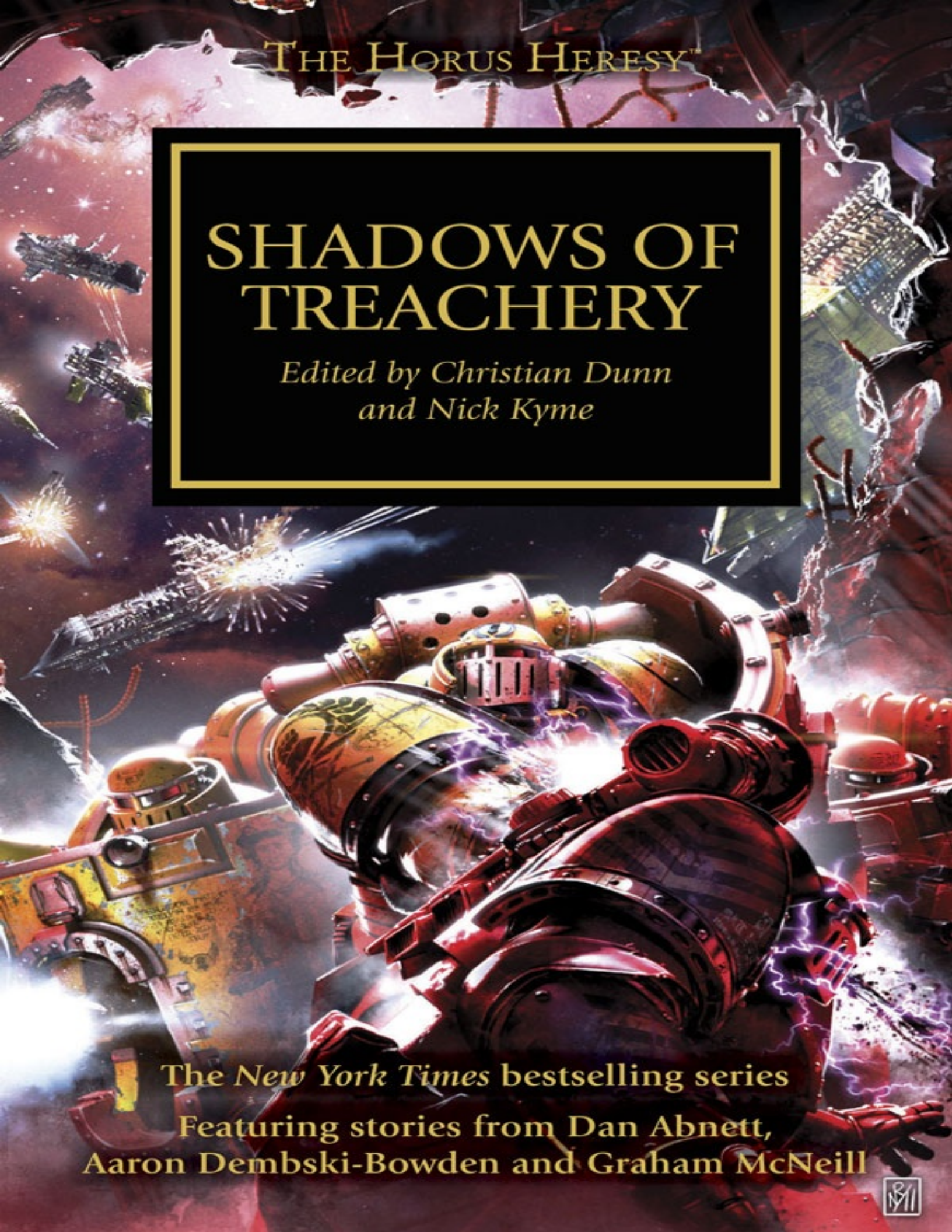
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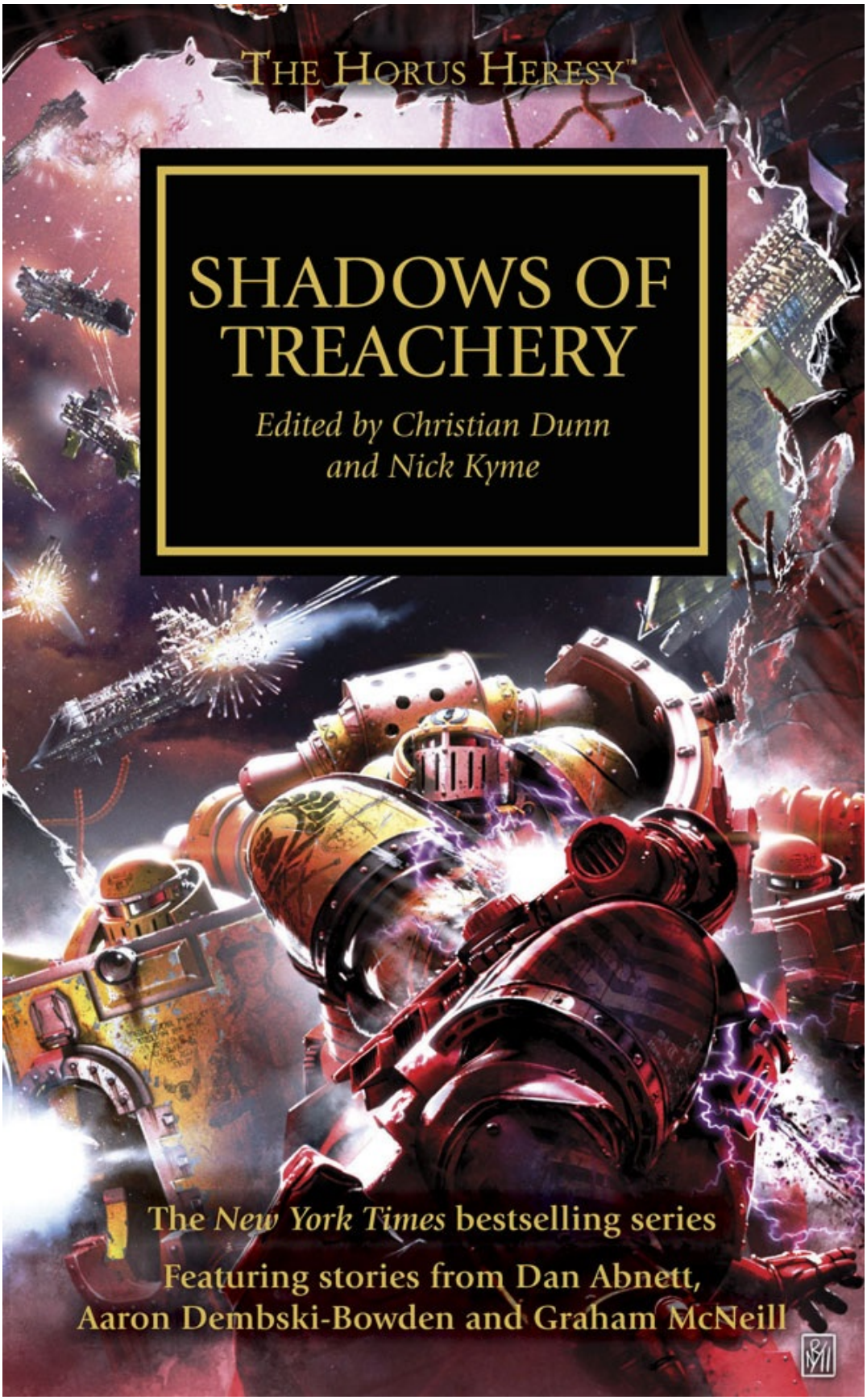
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SHADOWS OF TREACHERY

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.

The Age of Darkness has begun.

THE CRIMSON FIST

John French

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

Rogal Dorn, Primarch of the Imperial Fists, Praetorian of Terra
Perturabo, Primarch of the Iron Warriors

The VII Legion 'Imperial Fists'

Sigismund, First Captain
Amandus Tyr, Captain, 6th Company, Commander of the *Halcyon*
Pertinax, Captain, 14th Company, Commander of the *Hammer of Terra*
Alexis Polux, Captain, 405th Company, Master of the Retribution Fleet
Raln, Sergeant, 1st Squad, 405th Company

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

Berossus, Captain, 2nd Company
Golg, Captain, 11th Company, Commander of the *Contrador*

Imperial Personae

Armina Fel, Senior Astropath
Calio Lezzek, The Retribution Fleet's Master of Astropaths
Halm Basus, Primus of the *Tribune*

‘True strength is born in pain.’

– Ancient Terran proverb

‘All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened’

– from burnt fragments recovered from the Alba archives, attributed to the ancient poet Elliot

‘We are future memories. When our flesh is dust and our dreams faded we will be ghosts living in a land of legends, made real only by the memories of others. What we take with us into that realm of the dead, what we are remembered for, that will be the truth of our lives.’

– Solomon Voss, from *The Edge of Illumination*

PROLOGUE

The Nightside of Inwit

Can I bear this?

My world has become a shrinking sphere of cold darkness. Within there is only pain, beyond it there is nothing but hungering night. I cannot see. Ice has pooled in my eye sockets, my tears frozen against my skin. I try to breathe but each sip of air draws razor edges through my lungs. I cannot feel my hands. Numbness is spreading through me. I think I am on the ground, curled on the ice, my limbs shaking more slowly with every fading heartbeat.

The beast must be close. It won't have given up and it has my blood to follow.

My blood.

I must still be bleeding. It is not a large wound, a clean puncture through my calf, but it will kill me all the same. I have trailed red across the ice-dunes, trying to shut out the pain, trying to ignore the numbness, trying to keep moving. I have failed. The cold is taking me and the beast will have what is left.

I cannot bear this.

I was never going to succeed. I am not strong enough.

The world is turning dark, the pain fading.

There is a voice shouting out of the black distance. I try to hear what the voice is saying but it is too far away.

Hands grip my face. Pain shoots through my head. I scream. Fingers peel back my eyelids.

'Alexis, you must move.' I see a face, surrounded by rime-caked fur. The eyes are blue, the blue of glacial ice. Helias. It is Helias, my brother. He is still with me. Behind his face a blizzard fills the starlit sky with spiralling shards of white.

'You must move now.' I feel him grip my arms and yank me to my feet. Bright pain flares through my body, jagged-edged, slicing and grinding with every movement. I scream again.

'The pain is how you know you are still alive,' shouts Helias over the wind. I blink, trying to focus. The numbness recedes; I can feel my limbs again. There is

no comfort in the returning sensations. Part of me wants to be numb again, to lie down and let my blood freeze.

We stand on a narrow flat ridge, crevasses opening to either side, its top sculpted into undulations of white powder. Around us the fractured pinnacles of ice rise above the blur of the snowstorm like shards of flawed glass, dark blue in the starlight. The false radiance of the fortress moons shines down on us from beyond curtains of emerald aurora light. These are the Splintered Lands, the night-soaked side of Inwit which has never seen the sun. The cold is as constant as the night. The warriors of the ice caste only venture here in metal-plated environmental suits, but those who wish to join the Legion must cross this desolate place in rotting pelts and rags. It is a test, a journey through a midnight realm of agony. I have chosen that journey, but I will not see its end.

There is blood on the ice, frozen hard, trailing away into the distance.

'Where is it?' I say, looking at Helias. He shakes his head. Strips of rag hide his face, and the snow-caked furs magnify his bulk so that he looks more like a tundra-ox than a man.

'I don't know, but it is close,' he says, his voice muffled but still strong. I know that his hands are swollen and black with frozen blood, but the pain does not even reach his eyes. As I fade, he is unbowed. He is my brother, my twin in all ways except one. He is stronger than me, he always has been. I would not have made it as far as this without him, and now I have failed him. He should leave me here; I am weak and I will kill us both.

He looks at me, as if he heard my thoughts.

'Don't even think it, Alexis. I am not leaving you.'

I open my mouth, but the reply dies in my throat. Over the snow-laden wind I hear it again, a low animal sound, like a breath released with a smile of anticipation. Helias has gone utterly still.

There is a growl from behind me, a crackling purr that floods my veins with warm fear. The beast has found us. It wants me, I know; I am weak and bleeding and it has already tasted my blood. There is another growl, closer, longer. I can imagine it slinking across the ice behind me, its muscles moving with delicate slowness, its colourless eyes on my back. It is waiting to see what I will do, judging its attack for the moment when it is certain. And while it prepares it wants its prey to know fear.

The growl comes again, nearer, and I can hear the soft noise as the beast slides its furred body across the ice. I try to make myself calm, to ready my failing muscles for movement. Helias keeps his eyes steady on mine. He knows

what I intend; it is what he would have done. I nod once, very slowly.

I hear the beast's claws scratch over the ice. In my mind I can almost see its muscles bunching under its ice-dusted pelt.

The beast roars as it leaps towards my back, the sound rising over the blizzard. I dive to the side, my muscles on fire. I am too slow. The beast's jaws close on my trailing left arm. It turns as it lands, dragging me across the ice. Teeth tear through my flesh. I can smell the rank meat stink of its mouth, the animal reek of its body. It flicks its head, my arm still between its teeth. I hear joints pop and agony flashes across my eyes. I do not even feel it as I slam back to the ground. It releases my arm, and places a clawed paw on my chest. Ribs crack, and needle-sharp claws touch my skin.

There is a yell and suddenly the pressure on my chest is gone. I scramble to pull myself away, and look up. Helias is standing with his back to a crevasse, his body poised, arms spread like a wrestler. Between us the beast coils on its six legs. Pale fur covers its long body from the snout of its shovel-shaped head to the end of its twitching tail. It pauses, assessing the new prey that has drawn its attention away from the easier kill. It tenses. I cannot see my brother's face but I know that under the rag mask he is smiling.

The beast pounces. Helias is still. The beast's jaws are wide, its glassy teeth like knife blades. My brother moves at the last instant, pivoting as his arms come up to grip the beast's neck. He turns and the beast's momentum spins it through the air towards the waiting crevasse. It is almost perfect. Almost.

I start running, pain and injury falling away… The beast twists as it flies through the air, its forelimb raking flesh. The long hooked claws fasten on Helias's leg. The beast howls as both tumble together into the crevasse.

I reach the edge in time to grab my brother as he falls. His weight pulls me off my feet. The beast's claws come free and it vanishes into the crevasse, drops of blood following its panicked snarls into the darkness below.

Helias is hanging from my hand. I am on my front, my right hand gripping a ridge in the ice, my head and left arm extended over the crevasse's edge. My brother is spinning at the end of my grasp, his hand locked around mine. My arm is a lacerated ruin, the flesh punctured and chewed in the beast's jaws, and Helias's weight is pulling the wounds into broad and bloody smiles. The pain is like nothing I have ever felt. Blood is running over our hands. My hold is slipping. Pain and fear have become one inside me. I will not let this happen. I am strong enough, I must be strong enough. I try to pull him up and my grunt of effort becomes a scream. I cannot lift him. My right hand holding the ice ridge

slips. I jerk forwards, sliding further over the edge.

'Alexis.' My brother's voice is so low that it is almost lost on the wind. I look down at Helias. His eyes flick to our hands, the frostbitten flesh slick with blood that looks black in the starlight. I see what he already knows; my grip has already broken. It is his hand locked around mine that is holding him from the black void below.

He was always stronger than me. I look back into his eyes.

'No!' I shout.

He opens his hand.

One hundred and forty-one days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

My scream woke me from the dream.

My eyes snapped open. For a moment I thought I was blind, that I was still on Inwit and that the cold had stolen my sight. Then the chill touch of my armour cut the long-distant past from the present. I was not blind, and my brother had fallen from my hand long ago. I felt cold, as if the dream had reached into reality to wrap me in a memory of Inwit's chill. Ice covered my helmet's eye lenses, turning the view into a frosted haze of slowly shifting light. The ice was pink, the colour of snow melted to slush by blood. Warning runes pulsed at the corner of my eyes, slow, dim red.

Hard vacuum warning…

Armour integrity warning…

Gravity condition zero…

Injury assessment…

Armour power low…

I could not remember where I had been, or how I had come to be freezing while my armour died around me. I blinked, tried to focus my thoughts. Sensations began to creep across my body: a numbed echo of pain from my right leg, a black absence of all feeling from my left hand, a metallic taste on my tongue. *I am alive,* I thought, *and that is enough for now.* I tried to move my right arm, but the armour resisted no matter how hard I strained. I tried to close my left hand. Nothing. I could not even feel my fingers.

I looked back to the weakening pulse of the warning runes. The armour had cycled down to minimum power, turning it into little more than a lifeless shell of metal. It was keeping me alive, but it must have taken severe damage.

I closed my eyes, steadied my pulse. I knew where I was. I was floating free in the vacuum of space. The armour was keeping my body warm, but it was failing. Its power would fade, and I would begin to bleed more heat into the void. My enhanced flesh would last for longer than that of an ordinary human, but the cold would eventually reach my hearts and still their twin beats to silence. It was only a matter of time.

For a second my control almost broke. I wanted to scream, to thrash against

the iron embrace of the armour. It was the instinct of a creature trapped beneath the water, its last breath burning in its lungs, the blackness of inevitability closing around its life. I let out a slow breath, forcing the instinct to stillness. I was alive, and while I lived I had a choice.

'Re-power all systems,' I said. A pulse of electric sensation ran through my body as the armour obeyed.

Almost as soon as the armour powered up it began to scream. Sympathetic pain stabbed into my spine. Overlapping warning chimes filled my ears. Angry runes pulsed across my helmet display. I blinked the warnings away and the chimes faded. There were at most a few minutes of power left before the armour became a tomb. I brought my right hand up and scraped the melting ice from the helmet lenses.

Light poured into my eyes, raw and white-edged. I was floating in a vast chamber lit by sunlight that came from a source somewhere behind me. A layer of pink frost covered everything, glittering in the stark light like a sugar glaze on a sweet cake. Small crystals floated all around me, turning slowly with the last of their fading momentum. Irregular shapes coated in rose-coloured rime hung in mid-air across the chamber.

I blink-clicked a faint marker on my helmet display. The vox system activated with a moan of static. I set it to a full spectrum broadcast.

'This is Alexis Polux of the Seventh Legion.' My voice sounded hollow inside my helmet, and only more static answered me. I set the broadcast to a looped cycle that would last until the power faded. *Perhaps someone will hear. Perhaps there is someone that can hear.*

Something bumped against my shoulder and spun lazily into view: a frozen lump a little wider than my hand. It spun lazily end-over-end. I reached out to knock it away, and it turned over and looked at me with lifeless eyes.

Memory flashed through me: *the hull splitting with an iron roar as the ship spilled from the warp storm's grasp, blood arcing across the deck as debris sliced through the air; a human officer shouting, his eyes wide with terror.* I had been on a ship. I remembered the deck shaking under my feet and the screams of the storm outside the hull.

I jerked my hand back from the severed head, and the sudden movement sent me spinning through the frozen blood spray. The chamber rotated around me. I saw the ice-clogged servitor niches, and mangled banks of instruments. A tiered auspex dais pointed down at me from the floor, its screens and holo-projectors looking like the branches of a tree under winter snow. I tried to steady my

momentum but I just continued spinning. Warnings began to shriek in my ears.

Power failing…

Power failing…

Power failing…

Sights flicked past me, suffused in the warning rune's ruddy light. There were bodies fused to the walls by layers of blood ice. Sections of splintered yellow armour drifted amongst limbs and shattered bone. Severed bundles of cabling hung from the walls like strings of intestine. Streamers of data-parchment floated beside the foetal shapes of frozen servitors. I spun on and saw the source of the light: a bright white sun shining through a wide tear in the hull. I could see the glittering blue sphere of a planet hung against the star-dotted darkness. Between me and that starlight was a sight that made me stare as my view turned over.

Dead warships lay spread across the void. There were hundreds of them, their golden hulls chewed and split like worried carcasses. Vast strips of armour had peeled back from cold metal guts to show the lattice of chambers and passages within. Mountain-sized hulls had been portioned into ragged chunks. It was like looking at the jumbled remains of a slaughterhouse.

All my brothers are gone, I thought, and felt colder than I had for decades. I remembered Helias, my true brother, my twin, falling into darkness from the end of my fingertips.

Power failing… the warning runes chimed.

Final memories clicked into place. I knew where we had been going: where all of us had been going. I stared at the graveyard and knew one more thing with certainty.

Power failing…

'We have failed,' I said to the silence.

'…respond…' The mechanical voice filled my helmet, broken and raw with static. It took me a heartbeat to reply.

'This is Captain Polux of the Seventh Legion,' I said as my helmet display dimmed. Bursts of static filled my ears. I could feel the armour stiffening around me, its power finally drained. A quiet numbness began to spread across my body. The helmet display faded to black. I felt something bump into my chest and then fasten around me with a grind of metal. In the prison of my dying armour I could feel myself falling into darkness, falling beyond sight and pain, falling like my brothers. *I am alone in the darkness and cold, and I always will be.*

'We have you, brother,' said a voice that was a machine whisper. It seemed to carry out of a night filled with dreams of the ice and dead ships glittering in

starlight.

I knew it would fall to me. I knew the protocol of our Legion as well as any other, but that did not stop me wishing it was otherwise. The remembrancers and iterators speak of the Legiones Astartes and say that we are without fear, that nothing fills our hearts and minds but resolve and fury. Of the Imperial Fists they say more: that we have souls of stone, that emotion is silent inside our flesh. The truth, as ever, is something that words cannot touch. If we felt nothing we would have failed in the thousands of wars we have fought on the Emperor's behalf. Without doubt to temper boldness our enemies would have slaughtered us many times over. Without rage we would have never have reached the heights of glory. I do not feel fear, but inside me something of it remains, mutilated and withered, its strings tuned to different notes. Where a human would feel fear I feel the tug of another emotion, one layered and spliced into my psyche by the process that made me. Sometimes it is rage, caution, or cool calculation. And sometimes it is dread, a ragged echo of fear that is lost to me. And it was dread that I felt as the leadership of the fleet gathered on the *Tribune*.

They passed me as they filed into the granite and bronze chamber. A hundred war leaders arrayed for battle. Intricate silver patterns wove across the golden yellow surface of each suit of armour, and the emblem of the clenched fist worked in jet gleamed from chests and pauldrons. Some were old, their faces lined and scarred; others seemed young, though they were not. There was Pertinax, watching me with green machine eyes. Beside him walked Cazzimus, who had held the towers of Velga for six months. There Iago, who had fought in the first pacification of Luna. Beside them were marshals, siegemasters, and Legion seneschals. Between them they carried half a millennium of waging war.

Once they had all passed I followed, walking down to the centre of the chamber. The machine adepts were repairing my armour so I wore a saffron robe knotted at the waist with a blood-red cord. I stand taller than all my brothers, and even without my armour I still dwarfed every warrior in the room. The chamber was silent and my steps echoed as I limped between my peers. I could feel their eyes on me, watching, waiting. My left arm was stiff at my side, the old scars of teeth and the newer wounds hidden by my robe's wide sleeve. The healing flesh shot traces of pain up my nerves. None of it showed on my face.

The chamber was deep in the hull of the *Tribune*, now the flagship of the Retribution Fleet, or what was left of it. Polished bronze lined the walls and its

floor descended in tiers of black granite. Firelight from braziers filled the chamber with a red glow, and a ghost-green projection of a star and planets revolved above the open space at its centre.

Tyr had told me what must happen. He had come to see me as I recovered under the eyes of the Apothecaries.

‘It falls to you, Polux,’ he had said, looking down at me, his eyes dark in his axe-sharp face. The medical servitors had been bonding flesh to the left side of my body or I would have risen to reply. As it was I had to remain on the steel slab as the razor lasers and cauterising torches worked to rebuild my mashed and frozen muscle.

‘There are others more worthy,’ I had said, without breaking his stare. The edge of a sneer twitched at the edge of Tyr’s mouth. Control is one of the first qualities required of an Imperial Fist, and I had no doubt that Tyr’s hint of derision was no slip. Maybe he thought my words a sign of weakness, a betrayal of a flaw not yet discovered in my decades of service. Perhaps he simply did not like me. We are brothers, bonded together by oaths and the blood of our primarch, but brotherhood does not require friendship. In truth I do not know what he thought. I have always been apart, unable to read the signs of my Legion brothers’ thoughts. They are blank to me, and perhaps me to them.

Tyr had shaken his head, the hunched shoulders of his Terminator armour shifting with the small movement.

‘No, brother. You are Yonnad’s pupil, the heir to this command. The primarch and Sigismund passed it to him. Now it is yours, but it is not yours to refuse.’

I had looked into Tyr’s eyes that were so like our primarch’s. I had not spoken from false modesty; there *were* others more worthy to lead a force that was still a fifth of our Legion’s full strength. Better men had survived the wreck of the fleet: commanders with more campaign experience, higher in the rolls of honour, and more skilled at arms. Tyr was one such leader.

I am no hero, no champion of the Legion. I know how to defend and attack, how to stand and not to yield. I have nothing else. It is all I have. But we are Imperial Fists and form and order is not something we set aside easily. Yonnad had designated me as his successor. That command might fall to me so soon was a possibility I doubt he contemplated. But they had pulled me alive from a frozen wreck, and the storm had taken my mentor. Tyr was right; I could not refuse. It was my duty, and that duty led me in limping steps to the centre of a circle of my peers.

I stopped at the chamber’s centre, under the turning display, and looked up at

the faces lining the raked tiers. A hundred pairs of eyes glittered at me from the shadows. I felt deeply honoured and completely alone. The truth was that I did not fear the command. Yonnad was the Legion's finest fleet master and I was his best pupil; I had commanded expeditionary fleets and campaigns of conquest. With Yonnad dead in the storm I was his heir. It was an honour the Legion had tutored and trained me for, but it was an honour I did not want.

Our fleet was the primarch's first answer to his brother's treachery. Five hundred and sixty-one ships and three hundred companies had left the *Phalanx*. First Captain Sigismund had been given command but the primarch had taken him back to Terra, and so we had jumped towards Isstvan under Yonnad's command. The storm had seized us as we entered the warp and it had not let go. The Navigators could not find the beacon light of the Astronomican, and every course took us deeper into the tempest. We were lost, drifting on the currents of a malign sea. After what seemed like many weeks the Navigators perceived a break in the storms, a single point of stillness. We had fled towards it, and the storm's fury had followed.

The fleet had translated into reality on the edge of a star system. The power of the storm in those last moments was like nothing I had ever felt. Geller fields failed, hulls sheared into fragments and burned in the fires of their own reactors. Some ships had reached safety, but many had died, their corpses spat out of the warp to freeze in the void. Two hundred warships lost, their remains left spinning in the light of a forgotten star. They had found me in the remains of one of those broken wrecks. I was one of the few.

Ten thousand Imperial Fists gone. I could not grasp that loss.

Three hundred and sixty-three warships remained. The fates of over twenty thousand of my brother Imperial Fists were now in my hands. It was a weight that I had never carried before. *I must,* I thought. *Even if it is more than I can bear, I must.*

I nodded once to the assembled chamber.

Silence. Then a hundred fists slammed into chest plates in unison.

I gestured across the slowly rotating projection of the system we found ourselves in. Its name was Phall, a system so minor and un-noted that it existed only as an obscure footnote in navigational records. The projection spun, the orbiting planets disappearing as a section of the image grew to show the surviving Imperial Fists vessels. I let it rotate for a moment. There was a question that all those present needed to consider.

'Five hundred vessels aimed at the heart of the greatest betrayal ever

committed. Two hundred lost as they fled to the one point of calm amidst the storm. Two planets, once inhabited, now empty.' I looked at where shifting purple clouds represented the relative warp conditions around the system. 'Here we sit, surrounded by the storms that drove us here. Cut off from communication. Contained. Trapped.' I looked up at the watching faces; some were nodding as if seeing where I was going. Perhaps they had already seen the same elements of our situation and made the same judgement. I knew how to construct a trap, had used them in dozens of wars, and I knew what it was to kill a weakened and surprised enemy. Looking at the projection of our fleet floating in the Phall system I saw a trap. How anything could create such a thing was beyond me, but I knew what every instinct was telling me.

'And if we have been trapped here,' I said, and my voice carried through the silent chamber, 'who is coming for us?'

The Imperial Palace, Terra

His father waited for him at the summit of the oldest stronghold on Terra. The Bhab Bastion was an irregular cylinder of rock that rose to the roof of the world like a finger pointing to the heavens. In the long millennia of Old Night warlords, kings and tyrants had made it their refuge, and even they had called it old. Now it was an ugly relic surviving amongst the growing sprawl of the Imperial Palace, a blunt reminder of barbarity fused into a monument to illumination and unity. Sigismund wondered whether now the barbarity of the old fastness would triumph over the palace that had tried to tame it. *The old ways and necessities are come again*, he thought, *as they always do*. War had been the only constant of existence since mankind first walked under the rays of this sun, and it would last long after that same sun burnt to a cold ember. Of that he was certain.

The wind that blew across the bastion top was cold and scented by spices carried from the work camp on the distant mountain slopes. Above him clouds scudded through a brightening blue sky and a chill dawn light fell across the bare skin of his face. It was a face that might have been handsome, but war and genecraft had carved it to a different end. Noble features were spread across a blunt face, the skin pitted and the flesh under the right eye chewed by a scar that ran down the cheek to the jaw. But it was the eyes most people noted: bright

sapphire-blue and lit by hard intensity. Clad in burnished gold battle plate, swathed in a white surcoat crossed in black, he bore the marks and honours of a hundred wars like a second skin. In battles across the stars he had never been defeated. From the gladiatorial pits of the World Eaters to the conquest of star clusters he had demonstrated what it was to be a warrior of the Imperium. In another time he would have been the greatest warrior of his age, but in these times he was merely the strongest son of the being who waited for him by the tower's parapet.

Rogal Dorn glimmered in the brightening light. Standing head and shoulders taller than Sigismund, the primarch of the Imperial Fists was a demigod clad in adamantine and gold. Beside Dorn stood an astropath, a hunger-thin woman whose bent spine showed clearly under the green silk of her robe. Neither said anything but Sigismund could feel that a conversation had just ended, the severed tension still hanging in the air. He knelt, the wind stirring his tabard against his armour.

'My thanks, mistress.' Dorn nodded to the withered astropath, who bowed and walked away. 'Rise, my son,' he added.

Sigismund rose slowly and looked up at his father. Dark eyes glittered at him from a face of hard lines and unreadable stillness. Dorn smiled grimly. Sigismund knew what that meant; it meant the same as it had every day since they had returned to Terra.

'There is no word, my lord?' asked Sigismund.

'None.'

'The warp storms occluding the–'

'Would make communication unlikely, yes.' Dorn turned away. Out beyond the battlement an eagle turned against the cold blue sky, skimming the edge of a plume of drifting smoke. Dorn's eyes followed it, tracing the spiral of its flight as it rose on a column of warm air.

It had been many weeks since Dorn had heard and seen the evidence of his brother's treachery. Sigismund remembered the rage in his father's eyes. It was still there, he knew, wrapped in will and buried beneath layers of control. He knew it because it burned in him, a bright echo of his father's cold fury. Dorn had wanted to go and confront Horus himself, to hear the traitor's confession and bring retribution with his own hands. But duty had held him back: duty to the Emperor and the Imperium that Horus now sought to destroy. They had returned to Terra, but Dorn had sent his sons as emissaries of his anger. He had named it a Retribution Fleet. Thirty thousand Imperial Fists and over five hundred warships

had struck out towards Isstvan, a force great enough to subdue a hundred worlds, bearing a brother's wrath. Now a second force from many Legions gathered to strike at Isstvan, but no word had come from the Retribution Fleet.

'Word will come, my lord. The galaxy does not simply swallow a third of a Legion.'

'Does it not?' Dorn turned his dark eyes on Sigismund. 'War amongst the Legions. Horus a traitor. The ground under our feet becomes the sky. Can we be sure that we know anything for certain?'

'You have been listening too much to the worries of the council, my lord,' said Sigismund in a level voice. *Fear surrounds us*, he thought. It ran through the halls of Terra like a cold wind. It ran through the hive sumps of Nord Merica, and through the whisper colonnades of Europa. It spread in glances, rumour and in the silence of fears left unsaid. It was everywhere and it was growing. Horus's treachery had shaken all assumptions of loyalty and truth in the Imperium. In a single moment everything had become unsure. Who else had sided with Horus? Who could be trusted? What would happen? The questions went on without answer. As he looked into his father's eyes Sigismund reflected that knowing some of the answers gave little comfort.

'The fleet will arrive at Isstvan, and whatever happens to them they will endure. They are your sons.'

'Do you now regret returning here?' asked Dorn.

'No. My place is here,' he said, looking back into his father's face. Command of the Imperial Fists sent to Isstvan had been Sigismund's, but it was a duty that he had not taken. He had asked instead to return to Terra. Dorn had trusted his son and acceded to his plea without question.

He had kept the real reason to himself, sensing that his father would not understand. Sigismund barely understood it himself, but he had made his decision. That deception had weighed on Sigismund like penitent chains ever since.

Dorn smiled.

'So certain, so little doubt,' he said.

'Doubt is the greatest weakness.' Sigismund frowned.

Dorn raised an eyebrow. 'Quoting my own words is unsubtle flattery, or a very subtle rebuke.'

'The truth is a many-edged blade,' quoted Sigismund in a flat voice. Dorn's laughter blew across the platform like brief thunder.

'Now you really are trying to provoke me,' growled Dorn, but the words still

held a note of laughter. He gripped Sigismund's shoulder. 'Thank you, my son,' he said, his voice grave again. 'I am glad you are here.' For a moment Sigismund thought of telling him the truth, of telling him why he had returned to Terra. Then his father looked away and the feeling passed.

'And there is more for you here than keeping me from melancholy.' Dorn's eyes had gone to the stars glittering on the horizon's edge, his gaze fixed on where a red spark flickered like a cooling cinder. 'It has reached us,' he said. 'The treachery is at our threshold.'

'The reports are true, then? Mars is falling?'

'Yes.'

Sigismund felt anger coil through him at the thought of an enemy so close to the heart of the Imperium. The hate built within him, running through his limbs in a hot wave, feeding on lesser emotions until it was a focused line of barely shackled fire. It was this inner fire that had made him a warrior without peer beneath the Emperor and the primarch whose flesh he shared. For a moment he felt as he had before the encounter on the *Phalanx*, before everything had changed.

He let out a long breath. 'I will grind the Martian traitors to dust.'

Dorn shook his head. 'There is no time. For now we must secure what we need for the defence of Terra: the armour from Mondus Occulum and Mondus Gamma.' Sigismund nodded. If they had no allies remaining amongst the Martian adepts it would be a punishing task; punishing, but straightforward.

'My resources?'

'You have four companies, and Camba-Diaz will go with you.'

'To shackle my temper,' snarled Sigismund, seeing the wisdom in his father's order even as it pulled at his pride.

'All of us need others to balance us.' Dorn inclined his head slightly. 'Is that not so, my son?' Sigismund thought of the flicker of uncertainty he had seen in his father's eyes and of the real reason he had asked to return to Terra. *He stands at the centre of a storm of fear and betrayal*, he thought, *and I must stand with him no matter what is to come.*

'It will be done, my lord,' he said, and knelt at his father's feet.

'Of that I am certain,' said Rogal Dorn.

Eighty-eight days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

The fire from the fleet's engines blotted out the stars. Beyond the *Tribune*'s viewports hundreds of warships slid across the darkness in an interlacing web of plasma trails. Each was moving on a precise arc around its fellows, forming a shifting lattice like an ever-changing orrery. Some were so close that I could see the augur spines projecting from their backs and bellies. It was an arrangement I had created, placing each element and setting their trajectories in motion. Every ship was in a constant state of readiness, their shields raised, and their weapons ready. At another time such a creation might have pleased me, but it only served to fill my mind with half-formed worries. It had been weeks and nothing had happened.

I flicked my eyes back to the battlegroup commanders that stood in a circle around me. My first sergeant, Raln, stood a little behind me, his helmet in his hand, his face devoid of its normal crooked grin. We stood at the centre of a spit of white marble that ran down the centre of the *Tribune*'s bridge. Black stone walls curved above our heads to a vaulted roof. Round viewports ran the length of the bridge, their armoured eyelids open to the void beyond. In the clefts to either side of us rows of servitors sat bound to machines by thick creepers of cable. The smell of warm wiring and the sound of clicking cogitators filled the air. Human officers paced the long rows, followed by hovering servo-spheres that projected transparent curtains of data in front of their faces. Beneath my feet images of mythical beasts inlaid in gold and bloodstone writhed across the marble. The *Tribune* was the product of the Inwit shipyards, and like all ships birthed above that world of night and ice its master commanded on his feet. Those that came into his presence stood with him, equal in respect if not rank. It was a principle that appealed to me, but after dozens of councils I sometimes felt that the Inwit shipwrights had been kinder to the commanded than the commander.

Pertinax completed his report. I nodded thanks and then looked around the circle. Each of those assembled commanded one of the fleet's two-dozen battlegroups. Most of those in attendance were projections, their translucent images rendered in flickering light. Only Tyr, Raln and the spindle-limbed

Master of Astropaths Calio Lezzek were physically present. The council had been like all those that had preceded it; all was quiet. As it had been for weeks. I caught Tyr's eye and saw the old argument growing in the glance. I looked away to the only person yet to give their report.

'Master Lezzek.' The old man raised his head at the sound of his name, and cocked his head as if to listen. 'Is there word from Terra?'

'No, captain,' wheezed Lezzek, the loose skin of his face quivering above his silk-shrouded shoulders. 'There has been no word from Terra, or anyone else.' The answer was as expected; we were as deaf and mute as we had been when the storm first spat us out.

'Thank you,' I said, and was about to dismiss the gathering when Lezzek took a gulp of air and continued.

'We lost another two astropaths in our last attempt to send a message through the storms.' The old man paused, breathing hard. I could see the fatigue running through his body. His skin had a fever sheen to it, and a drop of blood formed at the corner of his mouth as he spoke. 'Fleet master, we have lost half the remaining astropaths in the fleet trying to get word to Terra. We cannot continue like this. The storms beat on our minds even when we sleep. It's like they are alive. Like they–'

'You will keep trying,' I said, a hard edge to my voice. Lezzek opened his mouth to speak but I did not give him a chance. 'There is nothing more important. Nothing.' Lezzek was silent for a moment and then nodded.

It was a death order, I knew. I was ordering his astropaths to give their lives whether they wished to or not. But there was no choice, and we had all suffered losses in this endeavour. Doing one's duty while bearing loss is the essence of loyalty. Still I felt the blind man's empty eyes boring into my back as I turned to the other commanders.

'Until next division,' I said, and brought my closed right fist to my chest. All of the Imperial Fists returned the salute. Lezzek simply bowed and shuffled away, looking as if he might fall over at any moment. One by one the projected images blinked out, until only Tyr remained. A frown creased his sharp face as he stared at the back of the departing astropath. A sensation of restlessness hung around Tyr even when still, a restrained energy like a predator looking out from the inside of a cage. He was honourable and true but he bowed in respect to no one other than Sigismund and Dorn himself. He was my brother by virtue of the alterations to our flesh and the oaths we had made, but he would never be a friend.

‘If you have something on your mind you should have voiced it, brother.’

Tyr gave me an accusing look. I braced myself for renewed debate. Behind me Raln moved discreetly away from us both, his constant enigmatic grin back in place.

‘He has a point, brother,’ said Tyr, looking at where Lezzek had stood. ‘We cannot continue like this.’

‘We must establish communications with Terra,’ I said, my voice flat and steady. Tyr nodded, still looking at the spot vacated by the astropath.

‘That is true, but that is not what I meant.’ He frowned, the scars across his face becoming jagged fissures. ‘The primarch ordered us to Isstvan. Word from Terra is vital but so is the mission.’

‘Ten ships, captain,’ I said quietly. Tyr winced. Since I had assumed command he had been arguing that the whole fleet should be trying to find a way through the storms. In his eyes staying in place and preparing our defences was a waste of time. After our first conversation I had agreed that we needed to try to break through the storms. I had given Tyr the responsibility of probing into the warp to try and find a safe passage. Ten ships had been lost over the last weeks, and twice as many had taken damage. The storms had not abated; if anything they seemed to have increased in ferocity.

‘If the whole fleet sought a way out–’

‘We would lose more, and we would not be able to maintain our readiness.’

‘Is that our duty?’ growled Tyr. ‘To stay here and wait for an enemy that may never come? Command did not fall to you to delay here while our enemy waits for us beyond the storms.’ He gestured at the viewports but kept his gaze on me. I saw something dangerous in the deep centre of his eyes.

I stepped closer to Tyr, a poised stillness suddenly running through my body. My armour was void-hardened battle plate, less massively plated than Terminator armour, but I still looked down on Tyr. ‘I have listened to you.’ My voice was low and level. ‘I agreed to let you seek a way out. But mastery of the fleet is mine.’ Tyr looked about to say something, but I shook my head slowly. ‘You could have had command. You are more honoured. Sigismund holds you in high regard, as does the primarch. The decisions I make could have been yours. But they are not. You and the others placed this duty in my hands.’ Unconsciously I found I had clenched my hand, the scarred fingers hidden by the enfolding bulk of my power fist. ‘You may continue to seek a passage out, but I will not risk more of the fleet, or our deployment. That is my command, captain.’

Tyr blinked once and then bowed his head, but when he looked up again I could still see fire in his eyes. I felt something kindle at the base of my neck, a hot acid sensation that spread through my head and chest. I recognised the feeling: anger. Not the focused rage of battle, but the low human sensation.

I opened my mouth, but never spoke the words that had formed there. At that moment, the *Tribune* screamed.

We are told that pride is a virtue, but only when bound to humility. I had been ready for an attack. Through the long weeks of watching, drilling and planning I had waited for the enemy to show his face. I had expected silent ships drifting on momentum from the system edge, or a blunt mass assault from behind the system's sun. Our disposition accounted for this, as it did for any number of other preludes to attack.

My plan, though thorough, had not anticipated the unimaginable. Of the many mistakes I made it is perhaps the easiest to understand but the most difficult to forgive.

It began with the servitors. There were hundreds of them, bound into the ship by interface trunks, and locked in cable cradles and machine niches. As one they howled. Some vomited data code as if trying to purge themselves. Others babbled half-formed words. Those without mouths thrashed in silence.

I tried to understand what was happening. Then the psychic wave hit me and pitched me over into a sea of fragmented sensation. I heard crying, jabbering, and pleading in a hundred desperate voices. I staggered, my vision swimming with luminous streaks of light and colour. I was falling and the sounds I heard were shards of memory and suffering that were not mine. I was drowning, stinking fluid filling my lungs. I was floating in the void knowing that I was about to die. I was screaming as an iron-faced figure walked towards me, bladed arms extending. I was shouting into the winds of a storm.

'Brother.' The word seemed to come from far away. I opened my eyes. A fever blur edged my vision and the screams echoed in my ears. There was a face looking at me, the pain on its features an echo of my own. For an instant I saw a ghost, a half-dream of the past meshed with the present. Then I felt a blow jolt my shoulder, hard enough to shake me inside my armour. My senses snapped back into sharp clarity. Tyr was looking at me, a snarl of suppressed pain twisting his thin face. Sweat beaded his skin. Behind him I could see human officers slumped over sensor daises, or twitching on the floor amongst pooled vomit and excreta. Blood dribbled from their eyes and ears, running over static-

filled data screens. I could tell by their stillness that some were dead. There was a taste of dry ash and grave rot in my mouth.

‘Look,’ shouted Tyr, and pointed to where the holo-projection of the Phall system turned in the air above us.

I looked, and was shouting for full battle readiness even as my mind processed what I saw.

A thousand energy signatures flared and blinked out in front of my eyes. Sensor bursts and auspex sweeps bombarded us, hundreds of them coming from sources that came to life and then vanished. Clustered spikes of data and auspex readouts bloomed and died across display screens on the bridge. It was like watching a phosphor shell scatter sparks across the night sky. The cogitators snarled as they tried to process and assess the sudden squall of data. And all the while the nightmares and visions churned through our minds in a swelling tide.

Then it was over. The last energy signals vanished from the holo-projection. The machines went quiet, the servitors slumped at their stations, and the fevered sensations faded from my mind.

Twenty-eight days before the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

They took our fear but not our doubts. *Am I right? Have I misjudged? What will happen?* The questions hammered on me and I bore them in silence. That is the necessity of command: that you hold doubt within. You cannot look to others for assurance, because you are their surety. You cannot share your doubts, lest they spread like a withering disease through muscle. You are alone. Sometimes I wonder if the primarchs feel this; if decisions eat at their thoughts as they do mine.

I had been drilling with my company for hours. Normally I find calm in the repetition of such practice, but the questions repeated in my mind. *What if the storms did not abate? Should I change my plan? What would Sigismund have done?*

The training chamber ran along the flank of the *Tribune* for half a kilometre. Blast doors closed tank-wide holes in one wall, shutting out the void beyond. The floor was a tangle of barricades and fire-scorched debris. Weapon servitors hung from the ceiling, sliding along gantries to rain fire from the different angles required by the training scenario.

As I glanced up I saw that the barrels of the servitors' cannons were glowing red. The guns increased their rate of fire. Sparks danced across the rim of my boarding shield. Lines of tracer fire scored the air above my head. My shield arm was vibrating with the impact of hard rounds. A line of tracer hit the crown of my helm, and I felt muscles tear in my neck. To either side of me two of my first squad stood with their shields braced across the left of their body, their legs set.

Each shield was a thick plate of plasteel two-thirds our height. The snouts of bolters jutted from the vertical slot cut into the right-hand side of each shield. Stood shoulder to shoulder, we created a wall of metal. In battles fought in the guts of starships this is what keeps you alive and allows you to win. Fighting this way is blunt and ugly; it is killing with discipline and workmanlike routine. It is perhaps the method of war I come closest to enjoying.

'Advance, with fire,' I roared. Our targets were servo-rigged automata that moved to preset patterns to mimic the response of a determined enemy. Only when we had closed the distance would real opponents replace machines and

servitors. We began to step forwards and every step was a volley of bolter fire, repeated with lethal rhythm.

Questions rang in my head in time with our tread. *Was Tyr right? Should we try and break through the storms?* After the sensory and psychic onslaught we had come to full alert, and waited for an enemy to show their face. They had not come. And the weeks had passed, and the drumbeat of questions grew in my head.

'Enemy, ten metres, front, closing fast,' shouted Raln, from my right. I could not see the enemy without looking over my shield, but I did not need to; Raln had seen and I trusted his judgement.

Was the Phall system really a trap? The populations of its planets were missing and we had seemed to come under a form of psychic attack. But we had not found the cause of the onslaught. There could be other factors at work. Our being here could simply be coincidence.

'Open ranks,' called Raln. Our shield wall opened, peeling back just before the enemy hit. Five Imperial Fists in a tight wedge, hammers and chainswords ready. Skill at war is a blade edge made sharp only by harsh practice, and so I had picked the best of the company as our close-quarter opponents. They came at us as I intended: like they wanted to kill us. The five came through the gap in our shield wall and spilled into the space behind. 'Close,' shouted Raln. Our ranks closed, enveloping the mock enemies within in a tight ring of shields.

Can I do this? A fifth of a Legion on full alert, drilling for an attack that I believed was coming… What if I am wrong?

A hammer blow hit my shield with a sound like a gong. An instant later one of the five enemy warriors had rammed his shoulder into the point where mine and Raln's shields touched. It was Settor, sergeant of the sixth squad, an old warrior seasoned by the conquest of worlds. He was also lethally fast. In the instant that a gap opened between our shields he had stepped forwards, forcing it wider and bringing his hammer down on my head. My vision swam. I blinked and in that second Settor was through our shield wall. He kicked Raln's legs out from under him and suddenly there was a wide hole in the circle of our shields. Above us the gun servitors rose on their hoists and bullets began to fall on our heads like rain.

I raised my shield high, covering my head. Settor's hammer head hit me in the gut. I staggered and a second blow crashed into my face plate. The eye lenses of my helm shattered, red fragments spilling down my front like drops of blood. I was dead, or would have been in a true fight.

'End,' I called over the vox. A second later the gunfire slackened as the

servitors hanging from the weapon gantries cycled their slug cannons to silence. I pulled my helmet off. Pieces of red glass ringed the eye sockets like shattered teeth. Around me my company lowered their weapons. Sulphurous weapon smoke fogged the air. Countless chips and gouges had stripped everyone's armour back to the dull metal beneath. Flattened slugs smeared the fronts of our boarding shields.

'There was an opening, fleet master,' said Settor, bowing his head as he spoke. 'A momentary gap in your guard. I used it to break the shield wall.' I nodded. It is the duty of all Imperial Fists to recognise weakness. Settor was right – my thoughts and focus had drifted. In a real fight it could have led to slaughter and failure.

'Thank you, brother,' I said with a nod. Settor moved away, his hammer hanging loose from his fists. I looked at the battered helm in my hand. Anger buzzed behind my eyes. I had allowed my doubts to make me weak. If I could not find the strength to bear my duty then I would kill us all.

There may be no enemy coming for you, whispered a craven voice at the back of my thoughts. *Tyr may be right and your duty might lie down another path*. I thought of Sigismund, our first captain. This was to have been his duty to bear, but he had returned to Terra with the primarch. I thought of the steps of mischance that meant that his duty now rested in my hands. Would it have been as heavy in his?

'Not bad.' Raln's voice cut through my thoughts. He had come to stand at my shoulder; blade cuts and gunfire had pitted and gouged his armour. He pulled his own helmet off, and took a deep breath as if savouring the thick smells of battle training.

'The wall broke,' I growled.

'For the first time in four hours.'

'It still broke.'

'Response and cohesion have increased.'

'Another four hours,' I said. Raln held up his helmet as if in surrender and I saw the hint of a smile on his scarred lump of a face. I have no idea why he smiles.

'The artificers will not thank you.'

'Another four hours.' I hefted my shield, feeling its reassuring weight.

Raln raised an eyebrow, but nodded and began to shout orders. The company began to reform. Overhead the gun gantries repositioned into a different configuration. I did not care if the artificers had to rebuild every suit of armour

in the fleet; when an enemy came we needed to be ready. The opinions of others, whether they agreed or not, were of no matter. Strength requires obedience, not thought.

I clamped my eyeless helm over my head. I would be without the information fed to me through the helmet's eye lenses, but I would continue anyway. In war you cannot rely on anything except your brothers. To do otherwise is weakness.

'Begin,' I called and the hammer chime of gunfire filled my ears.

'Fleet master?' The helm officer's voice cut through the noise as I was about to give the first order. It was Cartris; a human veteran of fifty years in service to the Imperial Fists, and the man I had trusted with coordinating the sweep of the system's planets, moons and asteroid belts. He was not the type to be easily shaken, but I could hear the tension in his voice. Was it an attack? Alarms would have rung through the ship. No, it was something else, something important enough to alert me immediately but not enough to raise a general alarm.

'I hear you, Cartris.'

'We have received a signal from our search units.' Cartris paused. I could hear the chatter of signal readouts and vox distortion in the background. 'They have found something.'

Tyr came with me. Perhaps I wanted him to see it and so answer his own questions. But perhaps there was another, less worthy motivation.

Our steps clanged dully as we approached the dead machine at the centre of the gloom-filled chamber. I glanced at Tyr, but his eyes stayed fixed on the isolated circle of bright light. The chamber had been an ordnance magazine. Its walls were three metres thick, and its triple-layered blast doors sealed by stratified layers of cipher codes. The machine sat alone under a buzzing stasis field, a specimen pinned out for display and then locked away from sight. Automated gun turrets twitched at our approach, and then cycled to stillness. It was as if we had passed into a shadow world that had formed like a cyst around a secret.

We stopped and looked at what the search teams had pulled from the ocean of Phall II. The machine glistened under the stab lights, water beading its bare metal body, the stasis field tinting the drops to sapphires. It had suffered severe damage, but its form was still clear: a blunt-edged cube of metal, studded with thruster vents and ugly protrusions. Its shell had been cracked open, first by jagged wounds that to my eyes looked like impact hits, and then by the smooth cuts of a melta torch. The tech-priests had dissected it and left it with its innards

exposed. I could see a jumble of cables and clusters of glass blisters like lidless eyes. Dribbles of yellow fluid hung unmoving from severed tubes. Shattered crystals had spilled over the stained floor. At its heart was something grey and soft, like a corpse bloated in lightless water. I could see a spine under pale skin, and above that a nest of cables haloing a head, its eyes and mouth stapled shut. There were no arms or legs, just stumps. A thick smell of ionised air filled my nose, and my teeth ached in time with the field's hum.

I had seen countless servitors created by the Mechanicum, and had waded knee-deep through mutilated bodies, but there was something about the machine and the amputated torso that was utterly repellent. I had examined it before, when the search teams first brought it aboard, but without the crowding tech-priests and labour servitors it felt different. It felt like going to a grave's edge to look down at the remains of a secret atrocity.

Tyr let out a carefully controlled breath beside me. 'What is it?' he said, his voice echoing in the empty chamber.

'We don't know, at least not with certainty,' I said. Tyr was moving around the edge of the stasis dome. 'The search units I sent to Phall II found it floating in the oceans, but it has clearly been exposed to the void. The adepts tell me that the machine components have several purposes.' Tyr gave a small nod, but was silent as I pointed to different portions of the wreckage. 'Most of it is made up of high-gain augur arrays and broad-spectrum sensors effective over a relatively short range. Then there is the human component. Apparently it would have been in a state of hibernation, kept alive with minimal power usage. Their assessment is that it was in orbit around Phall II, suffered damage and fell to the planet's surface.' Tyr was still staring at the grey remains of the human in the machine. I glanced at it then away; it made me want to shiver.

'Some form of servitor-controlled sensor vehicle? An asteroid survey unit, perhaps?'

'The adepts think it unlikely. In addition to the sensor equipment some of the systems seem to be a form of psy-amplifier.'

Tyr looked up. 'This created the psy-attack?'

'This and others like them. There were hundreds of energy signatures detected. There are most likely many more.'

'We need to find and destroy them; they could trigger again at any moment.'

'This one fell through the ocean planet's atmosphere as its orbit decayed. Our search teams would never have found it without the flare light of its re-entry.' I looked back at the broken machine and its pitiful occupant. 'It sustained damage

but the adepts say that most of its system had already burnt out. Its occupant was already dead.'

Tyr shook his head, his face taut with an emotion I could not read. 'They were killed once they had been activated,' he breathed. There was a note of disbelief and rage in his voice. 'Objects this size, now dead and without power; we could sift this system for a decade and find nothing. With no population on the planets there is no way of knowing who put them here or why they attacked us.'

'You are correct, but it was no attack.'

'You say that now?' I could see the months of dispute and controlled animosity straining at his will. After the psychic attack Tyr had not dropped his calls for the fleet to try and break the storms. If anything his attitude became more unyielding. As had mine. I had hoped that he would have seen the full implication of the recovered machine, and that my decisions had been correct. It was a weakness, and like everything built on weakness it was doomed.

'Look at it, brother.' Tyr's eyes flicked back to the machine, skimming over its broken form. 'The sensors, the augur and communication sifters. The psychic screams we all felt were not attacks. They were a message.' He looked up at me and I saw that he understood at last. 'It was no attack, brother. It was a prelude to one.'

The Imperial Palace, Terra

Silence followed the messenger. The click of her staff echoed through the corridors as she approached the planning chamber. Figures pulled back before her, their eyes following her steps, their whispered conversations stilling as if they could sense the weight of the news she carried. Four gold-plated Custodians flanked her and black sentinels followed in her wake like armoured mourners.

Within the planning chamber Sigismund caught the movement from beyond the chamber's open door and looked up. He saw the approaching messenger and the look on the astropath's withered and blind face. Something cold ran over his flesh at the sight. He knew the astropath: her name was Armina Fel. She had served the Imperium for three decades. That service had bent her spine and turned her hair to the white of raw cotton. She had brought countless messages to Dorn. Most of the news was bad, some frustrating, but none of it had required an escort. It was almost as if what she brought needed to be guarded like a

prisoner in case it slipped its bindings and ran free.

Sigismund turned to look at his father, but if Rogal Dorn had seen the approaching procession he gave no sign. Vadok Singh was outlining his proposed fortification of the Imperial Palace. The war mason paced amongst the broad pillars, perfumed smoke puffing from his mouth as he sucked on his long-stemmed pipe. Dorn stayed in the centre of the room, frowning down at the plans spread across the table at the room's centre. Brass projection apparatus hung from the ceiling, scattering images of Singh's plans across the chamber's sandstone walls. The room seemed almost peaceful, but Sigismund knew that this short moment of calm was a lie. He had returned from Mars to find the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear growing stronger with every day. It was as if the whole of Terra was holding its breath and waiting to see where the next blow would fall.

'The Dhawalagiri Elevation?' said Dorn, scowling at the sprawling schematics. 'You think that necessary?'

'Not *necessary*,' purred Singh. 'A *necessity*, Rogal.' The war mason flicked a skeletal finger at one of his silk-robed slaves and the man changed the focus on one of the projection lenses. 'Look at the inherent weakness in the alignment of the outer elements. You of all people must see that if this section of the palace is to hold we must remake it, and remake it now.' Normally the war mason's familiarity would have angered Sigismund, but he barely heard the words.

The procession was at the chamber's open doorway. Behind Sigismund, Dorn gave a low snort.

'Necessity is a word that makes me suspicious, old friend,' said Dorn.

Sigismund watched Armina Fel and her escort pause on the threshold. The astropath brought her hand up to the empty pits that were her eyes. Pearls of moisture glittered on her cheeks. *She is crying*, he realised. Beside her one of the Custodians brought the butt of his spear down three times on the stone floor. The sound of the blows rippled through the pillared chamber.

Dorn raised his head slowly.

'There is news,' he said in a flat voice, and looked at Armina Fel. For a moment Sigismund thought he saw an unreadable expression flicker across his father's face. 'It is all right, mistress. Please tell us what you must.'

The woman's lips were trembling.

'There is word from Isstvan, my lord.' She took a ragged breath. Dorn stepped forwards, his black robes falling back from his arms as he reached out. He gently raised her face until her empty eyes looked up at him.

‘Mistress,’ he said softly. ‘What has happened?’

Armina shook herself, poise and strength returning to her features, as if some of Dorn’s stillness and strength had flowed into her. She began to speak, her voice the monotone drone of precise recall.

‘Imperial counter-strike massacred on Isstvan V. Vulkan and Corax missing. Ferrus Manus dead. Night Lords, Iron Warriors, Alpha Legion and Word Bearers are with Horus Lupercal.’

Nothing moved in the chamber. The black sentinels and Custodians stood like statues of jet and gold. Vadok Singh simply stared at Armina, the ember in the bowl of his pipe cooling to grey ash. For a moment Sigismund felt nothing, as if what he had heard had stripped all sensation away. A primarch dead. Two lost. Three Legions gone, and four gone from friend to enemy in the space of a handful of words.

This is it, thought Sigismund. *As she showed me. This is the true beginning of the end. If four more Legions can turn against us, then why not more still? They shall come here, and here we must stand, and stand alone.* He realised that he was shaking, taut muscles vibrating under scarred skin. For a second he wondered if it was fear, if that long-dead emotion had returned to him after so long. Then he recognised the sensation: it was hate. Hate so bright and focused that he could almost see it. *Let them come. Here my father stands, and I will stand with him.*

Dorn’s hands fell from Armina’s face. His eyes were black holes in a facade of stone. Hard control radiated from him like cold from glacial ice. He looked at Sigismund. For an instant Sigismund thought he saw a reflection of his own anger in his father’s eyes, a flash of rage, quickly hidden.

‘Find any remnants of the new betrayers that remain in the system.’ Dorn’s voice was a hoarse growl. ‘Use whatever and whoever you need. Take them or destroy them as you must. Do it now, my son.’

Sigismund began to kneel, but Dorn was already turning back to Armina. The astropath flinched as his eyes fixed on her.

‘Get a message to the Retribution Fleet. They must return here immediately.’

Armina swayed as if the words were a storm wind. ‘Lord Dorn, we have had no word from them.’ She swallowed. ‘They may have reached Isstvan V before the massacre. They may…’ Her voice trailed away as Dorn took a step closer.

‘If you have to burn through a thousand astropaths you will reach them.’ Dorn’s voice was low but it seemed to fill the room. ‘Bring my sons back to Terra.’

The Isstvan System

‘This information is accurate?’ Golg’s question broke the silence, but the tension remained. The only sound was the hum of armour and the dull rumble of the *Iron Blood’s* reactors. Golg shifted, his hunched augmetics hissing nervously. The other Iron Warriors captains kept their eyes on the luminous surface of the holo-table, their shapes casting bloated shadows onto the walls. They were the senior commanders of their Legion, those that had the primarch’s countenance. Forrix, his gaunt face framed by a hood of vulcanised rubber. Berossus, his pale eyes glittering above a sneering half-smile. Harkor, in Terminator armour still black with soot from the slaughter on Isstvan V. Dargron, his face hidden behind a slot-eyed face plate. Varrek, his face so twisted by scar tissue that it looked like chewed meat. None of them looked at Golg. They were waiting to see how Perturabo would respond. They had all known others who had presumed the Lord of Iron’s favour and paid for their mistake.

Golg raised his eyes from the luminous columns of data. Perturabo was watching him, his gaze unmoving. Golg felt the danger in that glittering gaze, the force of destruction behind the oil-black eyes. A hammer, as tall as Golg himself, rested head down under Perturabo’s hand. The black iron head gleamed in the ember light that lit the chamber. Perturabo made the smallest of movements towards the illuminated table.

‘It comes from the Warmaster,’ said Perturabo, his eyes moving from Golg to the other captains. None met his gaze.

Golg ran his eyes down the glowing data runes. What it represented left his mouth dry. Over three hundred warships caught in a backwater system like fish in a whirlpool. A fleet of ships pinned in place and waiting for extermination, and here were all of those ships’ dispositions and characteristics, listed and laid out in cold light. It was too perfect, too neat. How could even the Warmaster achieve such a thing? It was daunting in its implication. There was possibility here, though, the possibility to rise high in the sight of the primarch. Golg knew that the other captains would be thinking the same. They would be judging how much power they could gain, and how high were the risks. Golg opened his mouth to ask another question but Forrix spoke before him.

‘This information was gathered first-hand?’

Perturabo nodded once.

‘By scout elements in the system.’

Golg managed to hide his surprise at Perturabo’s words.

So this was no random event, he thought. *This was planned before we came to kill the weakling Legions on Isstvan*. But then what else would he expect from the Warmaster and the Lord of Iron? He thought of the massacre they had just committed, of the Legions they had butchered. They were weak and destroying them had been nothing more than another task to be completed. But the Imperial Fists were rivals of old, arrogant pretenders to honours and reputations they had bought with lies. Golg felt himself smile. The possibility of breaking Dorn's sons was a prospect so rich he could almost taste it. *Was this part of the price of our allegiance to Horus*, he wondered? The chance to break one enemy bought by the deaths of others?

'What of the storms?' asked Harkor, eyes hooded by a frown. 'If they cannot penetrate them, how will we?'

'Our passage will be possible. The Warmaster guarantees it,' said Perturabo. That anyone could make such a guarantee staggered Golg. He caught Forrix's eye as he glanced up, held the first captain's cold gaze for a second and then looked down again.

'If they suspect the possibility of an attack they will be prepared,' said Forrix, extending an armoured hand to the table surface to flick between details of ships.

Berossus shook his head at Forrix, his lip curling. 'If it is Sigismund who commands them, he will not sit patiently in his cage. He will make attempts to break through the storms. That will make them less prepared, and more vulnerable.'

Perturabo turned his head slowly to stare at Berossus. The commander of the Second Grand Company seemed to shrink in spite of the size of his reinforced armour.

'Sigismund has command,' growled Perturabo, his voice heavy with disgust. 'My brother will not have trusted this fleet to another.'

Berossus straightened, eagerness clear in his face. 'Lord, with an equal number of ships I will break them with the first attack. I will–'

'No.' The word hung in the air. Perturabo stepped forwards until he was looking down at the glowing lines of data frozen on the surface of the holo-table. Golg could see the cold blue glow glittering in the primarch's eyes, like starlight on a blade's edge. 'No. They must not simply be broken. They must be ground to nothing. Dorn does not deign to come himself, but his favoured pup will bleed for him. All of the ships currently under your command will go.' He looked up, his gaze moving between them as he spoke. 'And I will command the attack myself.'

The eve of the Battle of Phall

The Imperial Palace, Terra

Dusk shadows filled the Investiary, pooling at the base of the amphitheatre's wall and spreading from the statues ringing its centre. A sky of fading blue crossed by thin cirrus clouds domed the quiet space. Cooling air, tinged with the smell of evening dew on stone, licked Sigismund's skin as he stepped from one of the wide doors at the amphitheatre's edge. Lumen globes were kindling atop wrought-iron posts, but the open space was still a place of half-light, on the boundary between day and night. The Great Crusade had scattered to the stars from that spot, forged by the oaths sworn there.

So many of those oaths now broken, thought Sigismund. He looked up at a figure towering against the sky, its white marble features caught somewhere between nobility and determination. *Guilliman. Still with us for certain*, he frowned. *As far as we know, as far as anything can be certain.* There had been twenty, twenty replicas of the primarchs carved from white marble by the last of the Pendelikon artisans. Two were gone, their ouslite plinths empty, and their Legions consigned to oblivion. Nine hid beneath pale fabric, their faces swathed as if to conceal the shame of their treachery. In the distance he could see a golden figure standing still at the base of a statue. Something about the figure seemed to draw the eye, as if it held a greater scale than could ever be captured by chisel and hammer. He began to walk towards the distant figure of Rogal Dorn.

Sigismund had seen something change in Dorn since news of the Isstvan V massacre, as if internal structures of will and strength were realigning within the primarch. Dorn moved from briefing to briefing, watching as the labour armies began to tear down and remake the palace, pressing the astropaths for news and connection with the worlds beyond the solar system, consulting with Valdor and the Sigillite in sealed chambers. In the brief moments in between Dorn had taken to walking the parapets and silent places of the palace. Sigismund did not know what weighed on his father's mind, but he did know that what he had to tell him would only increase the burden.

He wondered again why he had decided to tell his father the whole truth. Guilt? Yes, guilt was part of it. Guilt at having deceived him, at having relied on

his trust while knowing he would not understand the truth. *I am sorry, father, but you must know. I cannot keep it from you. You must see.* He thought of one of the basic laws of strategy, a dry line of insight that now seemed charged with new significance: *The first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against.*

Dorn was staring up at one of the hidden statues as Sigismund approached.

'Yes, my son?' said Dorn, without turning.

Sigismund looked up at the covered stone. There were still recognisable features under the wind-rippled fabric: the hint of a predatory stance, the projecting shape of a clawed hand pressed against the covering as if about to rip through. *Curze*, he realised, the brother who had tried to kill Dorn. *Was that a sign of what was to come? Should we have seen these darker days in that moment of near murder?*

'They should be torn down,' said Sigismund. 'All of the traitors. They should not stand beside those who keep their oaths.'

Dorn gave a low chuckle and turned to look at Sigismund. 'Would you like to do it yourself?'

'Give me the word, lord, and I will do it with my own hands.'

Dorn gave a brief smile and shook his head.

'Not yet. We are not at such a point yet.'

'Are we not?' asked Sigismund, his face still, eyes unblinking. Dorn did not answer but looked back up at the statue of Curze that stood covered behind Sigismund.

'No,' growled Dorn. 'The Imperium endures and will outlast this treachery.' Sigismund thought that Dorn looked as if he were speaking to Curze's statue as much as him. 'There is still honour, there is still loyalty.' Dorn dropped his gaze, frowning. 'I do not know how this war will unfold, my son. I do not know what it will demand of us, but I know that eventually it will end, and for that day we must be ready.'

Sigismund echoed Dorn's frown. 'Horus has the initiative, we are the ones mired in confusion. He could cut us apart piece by piece, wait until we are so weak that there is no resistance left.'

Dorn looked sharply at Sigismund, but he could tell that his father had considered the same possibility.

'If it was Curze or Alpharius then perhaps, but they are not at the heart of this.' Dorn looked to where the moon was rising at the darkening edges of the sky. It was red, stained by the dust and smoke rising from the palace as it settled into

night. ‘He will come here,’ said Dorn softly. ‘He will not stay out amongst the stars and bleed us to nothing. No, he is still Horus. The single spear thrust to the throat, the final killing blow. He will come here to finish this. One night we shall look up and see the heavens burning.’

He sees it already, thought Sigismund. *At least in part. He shall see that I was right, that my choice was right.*

‘Father.’ Dorn looked at him. Sigismund could feel the primarch’s eyes playing over his face, assessing, judging.

‘Something troubles you?’

‘I must speak with you about why I requested to return here, about why I did not take command of the Retribution Fleet.’

‘We have talked of this before. I saw no reason to question your judgement then and I see none now.’

Sigismund swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

‘I had another reason.’ Sigismund felt the words hang in the air. *I am committed now,* he thought. *There is no turning back.*

‘Speak,’ said Rogal Dorn. The primarch had become still, his gaze fixed, as if his entire being focused on Sigismund. A dust-scented wind stirred his white-edged cloak, lifting it against the growing gloom.

Sigismund looked away, his mind weighing how to begin.

‘It was on the *Phalanx*,’ he said, after a moment. ‘The fleet was being broken up, preparing to follow back to Terra or strike towards Isstvan.’ He thought back to that narrow sliver of time, remembered the tension that ran through every Imperial Fists ship after Garro’s revelation. Some thought it could not be true but those who had seen the evidence had no such comfort. While the truth soaked in, the Imperial Fists had made ready for war. ‘I was walking the lower habitation decks. I am not sure why, I do not think that I had a reason besides perhaps seeking peace.’

‘You lacked clarity?’ said Dorn, his blank voice as unreadable as his face. Sigismund shook his head.

‘I knew what you required of me.’ He glanced away to where the shadows of night gathered at the margins of the amphitheatre. ‘Perhaps I was looking for purpose.’

‘Purpose?’ said Dorn. ‘You knew what was required but you sought purpose?’ Sigismund nodded, and let out a long breath.

‘I knew my orders, but I was missing something.’ Sigismund blinked, paused. He remembered those days on the *Phalanx* more clearly than he had lived them.

He had felt diminished, as if Garro's words had taken something vital from him. 'For so long I took each step of the crusade without doubt. Each campaign, each battle, each blow had purity. That was my strength, had always been my strength.'

Dorn lowered his chin and his eyes seemed to darken. 'Your thoughts seem far from clear, *captain*.'

'Perhaps, lord,' nodded Sigismund.

'So you refused the command because of this? Because your purity of purpose was disturbed?' There was anger in Dorn's voice, controlled, held back but still there.

'No, lord. I would have done your will without question.'

'But you did not.' Sigismund felt ice in the words, the judgement forming in them. *I must tell it all*, he thought, but did not meet his father's eye as he continued.

'I was on the deck where Garro's civilians were quartered. It was deserted and I thought I was alone.' It had been quiet, he remembered. The whole fleet had bustled with preparation and tension but at that moment the decks he walked had been silent. Afterwards it had struck him as strange, as if he had walked along a corridor of stillness between moments of activity. 'It was only when she spoke to me that I realised I was not alone. "First captain," she said. I drew my sword and turned.' Sigismund frowned at where his hand rested on the pommel of his sheathed sword. 'She stood only five paces behind me. I had not even heard her approach.'

'Who?' asked Dorn. Sigismund looked up, his eyes unfocused.

'The remembrancer,' he said, the memory suddenly more vivid than the present: a human girl in a pale robe. 'Keeler,' said Sigismund. 'The one that spoke to you before we–'

'I remember her,' Dorn snapped. Superstition clustered around Euphrati Keeler. Sigismund knew that some form of cult had sprung up around the girl. It was dangerous, a breach of the Imperial truth. Some said she was a witch, others a saint. She had an undeniable confidence and poise, but then so had history's many false prophets. Sigismund knew this to be true, but somehow that truth seemed dimmer as he remembered Keeler standing in the memory of a stone-lined corridor.

'She was just there, looking at me as if she had been waiting, as if she knew I would come.' She had smiled, he remembered. A smile of understanding in a fragile face too young to show such calm. She had nodded as if answering a

question he had not asked. *You have questions,* she had said.

‘What did she say?’ said Dorn, and the memory dissolved back into the reality of the Investiary and his father’s voice.

‘Enough that I came to you and asked to return here, my lord,’ said Sigismund.

‘And what could ever have been enough for that?’

The question echoed in Sigismund’s ears. The moment extended, filling him with vivid sensations: the perfect texture of the ouslite plinth ten paces behind his father’s back, the rustle of fabric shifting in the breeze around the statues. He could detect a dozen spices in the wind, traces of smoke, dust and coming rain. He suddenly realised it was the smell of a half-forgotten life, of a brief childhood lived in the drift camps on the Ionus Plateau. It was the smell of a lost home. He had not thought of that half-remembered scrap of time for decades. He wondered why it had returned to him now.

He looked into Rogal Dorn’s eyes.

‘It was not just what she told me. It was what she made me see.’ Sigismund paused, remembering Keeler’s face. *You must decide,* she had said, and there had been sorrow in her voice. ‘The war will come to Terra,’ said Sigismund.

‘A possibility that you did not need a remembrancer to reveal to you,’ said Dorn as he raised a hand to point at Sigismund’s chest. The threat in the gesture was like the muzzle of a gun pointing at his heart. ‘Was it not you that said Horus could try and defeat us without coming here? Now you say back to me a judgement that I have reached myself and call it revelation.’

‘I hoped that you might disagree, my lord. That there might be another possibility.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘There is not. I cannot doubt your judgement that Horus will bring the war to Terra. It does not refute my choice, it validates it.’ Dorn looked away, his face suddenly half-hidden in the gathering night. ‘It is not the fact that the traitors will come here, it is how,’ said Sigismund, and remembered.

‘You must choose,’ she had said. He had been about to tell her to return to her quarters, to keep her falsehoods to herself. ‘You must choose your future and the future of your Legion, Sigismund, First Captain of the Imperial Fists.’ Her words had held him in place. Fear filled him, forgotten and alien in its raw intensity. ‘You must choose where to stand. By the words of your duty, or by your father’s side at the end.’

‘The end of what?’ he had managed to say.

‘The end of everything that has been,’ she had said.

Sigismund kept his eyes fixed on his father, trying to read the effect of his

words as he spoke. ‘She spoke and I seemed to see what she spoke of.’ Her words had unfolded in his mind in blurred reality, like snatches of dreams, like flowering nightmares. ‘I could see it. It was real.’

So many ships that the sky was iron. Fire falling like monsoon rain. Armoured bodies heaped as high as the Titans that strode amongst them. Hundreds of thousands of enemies, millions, an uncountable horde surging through the broken walls. An angel, its wings red in the pyre light of a burning palace.

‘They will come here, their numbers will blot out the sun and cover the ground, and we will be few, father.’

‘Few or many, let them come,’ growled Dorn.

‘We will be few and they, they will be far more than we can defeat. That is the point when we will face the end.’

Imperial Fists tumbling from blackened walls, falling like water, broken, bloody. Columns of smoke so tall that they touch the armoured sky. And still they come. Ships blasting dead wrecks aside to scatter more troops to the surface.

‘You must understand what it will come to,’ she had said. As she spoke he had known it was true. The universe was war without end. The Imperium had turned on itself and so it was only a matter of time before everything rested on a single battle, on a sword’s edge.

‘It will come to that, father,’ he said quietly. ‘It will come to the last breath in the body of the Imperium. I saw it, and understood that it was true, and that I had to choose.’ Another image opened in his mind’s eye: his own corpse, drifting lifeless and frozen on the edge of a forgotten star system in a future he would not see. ‘I chose to return here with you.’ It had taken him days to decide, to sift through his instincts and reasoned arguments. He had tried to forget what she had told him, what her words had made him see. But the possibility had eaten at his mind. In a galaxy where Horus turned on the Imperium, what other outcome could there be?

‘What is the other path?’ he had asked. She had shaken her head.

‘Death, Sigismund. Death and sacrifice far away, under the light of an unknown star. Alone and unremembered.’

She had gone, leaving him alone in a silent corridor.

‘That is why I returned to Terra. I said that I was needed here, and I spoke truly.’ Dorn was still not looking at Sigismund. ‘Let them come. I will be here to stand with you, father.’

Dorn was silent, his face an unmoving echo of the stone statue that looked down at the Investiary floor. He stared at Sigismund, his eyes seeming to pierce

the fading light. Sigismund could not look away.

I have chosen, thought Sigismund. *I have chosen to be here at this moment.*

Dorn breathed in the twilight air. He flexed his left hand and watched the movement of his metal-clad fingers. He looked up. Sigismund saw the coldness in his father's eyes, the icy glitter. He felt the instinct to fall to his knees, to speak again, to say something, to claw back the past. Dorn opened his mouth, his lips moving slowly. When his voice came it was like the whisper of an oncoming storm.

'You have betrayed me,' said Rogal Dorn. Sigismund staggered. He felt as if the words had flayed away all his conditioning and control. If Dorn noticed the effect of his words he did not pause. 'We are made to serve. That is our purpose.' Dorn's voice echoed off the raked stone tiers of the amphitheatre. He was shaking as if huge forces were straining inside him. It was the most terrifying thing Sigismund had ever seen. 'Every primarch, every son of a primarch exists to serve the Imperium. Our existence has no other meaning.' Dorn took a step forwards, his presence seeming to tower taller than the statues of his brothers. 'Our choices are not our own, our fate is not ours to choose. Your will is mine, and through me the Emperor's. I trusted you and you squandered that trust on pride and superstition.'

Sigismund found his voice.

'I stand with you.' His voice was raw and unfamiliar, a stranger's words coming from his mouth. 'I will stand against the enemies of the Imperium until I die.'

'You believed the lies of a charlatan, a demagogue who pretends to powers we fought to free humanity from. I gave you a duty and you turned away from it. Your duty is not here; it was out amongst the stars.'

'Even if this war will be decided here, my lord?' Sigismund could not believe that he was speaking, but the words came out of him. 'I saw it. I know it will happen.'

'So certain, so little doubt,' said Dorn, his voice low. Sigismund could feel the danger in that soft tone. 'You murder the future. You condemn it with your pessimism and arrogance.'

'I sought only to serve,' said Sigismund desperately.

'You presume to feel the hand of destiny on your heart. You believe that you see more clearly than I do, than the Emperor does.' Sigismund heard the judgement in the words, and thought of Horus, of the unknowable reason he had turned against the Imperium, of the other statues that stood above them with

hidden faces. Dorn nodded as if seeing the realisation form in Sigismund's mind. 'Those are the virtues of a traitor.'

'I am no traitor,' said Sigismund; the words sounded fragile in his ears, as if they reached him from far away. He was not looking at Dorn, he could not.

'No?' said Dorn. 'I say that your duty was to obey, not deceive. I say that the future you think inevitable is a lie. I say all this and yet you do not accept it. Arrogance.' Dorn spat the word and looked towards the plinth of Horus's statue 'Our purpose was defined for us. We are not humans that have the luxury of choice. We are the Emperor's warriors. We exist to serve, not to rule our own destinies. Turn away from that truth and we corrupt the illumination we were made to spread. It is not just on which side you fight, it is why.'

Horus, thought Sigismund. *He speaks of Horus but condemns me with the same words*. Suddenly he felt he saw the architecture of his father's thoughts, the calculated judgements balanced by beliefs as immovable as mountains. He saw the irreversible logic. *There is no way back, no other way for him to judge me. What have I done?*

'I serve the Imperium,' he said, and his voice was shaking.

'You serve your own pride,' spat Dorn. Sigismund swayed but caught himself. He felt hollow, his mind empty of all of the surety and fire that had defined him. *Keeler was wrong*, he thought. *This was the choice of death alone and unremembered. There is only one path open to me now.*

'My lord.' Sigismund began to kneel.

'You will stand,' roared Dorn. 'You have no right to kneel before me.'

Sigismund drew his sword, its gleaming length coal-black in the failing light.

'My life is yours, my lord,' he said, and turned the sword hilt to Dorn, and bowed his head, the flesh of his neck exposed above the collar of his armour. 'Take it.' Dorn reached out and took the sword. His eyes glinted down its length, hard, dangerous, the eyes of death itself.

Dorn spun the blade, a movement so fast that Sigismund saw it only as a blur. He had an instant to think, to remember the smells of a lost home carried on a dry wind. His father brought the sword down.

The tip of the sword punched through smooth marble and buried itself a foot deep in stone. Dorn took his hand from the hilt, leaving the blade quivering in front of Sigismund.

'No,' said Dorn, a low growl. 'No. The Imperium will endure. But you, you have made your decision. There will be no easy end for you. None will ever know of what you have done. I will not allow your fear and pride to sow doubt

in our ranks. Your shame will be yours to bear alone.'

Sigismund felt as if the Investiary's vast circumference had closed to a tight circle around him. His body felt distant, the touch of his armour uncomfortable against his skin.

'You will continue in rank and position as you have, and you will never speak to any other of this. The Legion and the Imperium will never know of my judgement. Your duty will be to never let your weakness taint those who have more strength and honour than you.'

Sigismund felt his hearts beating. His mouth was dust dry.

'As you will, father.'

'I am not your father,' roared Dorn, his anger suddenly filling the air and echoing from the amphitheatre walls. Sigismund fell to the floor. He could feel nothing. A ringing filled his head. It was a scream, he realised. A forgotten scream of loss and pain, mute inside his soul that was no longer human. Dorn looked down at him, his face swallowed by dusk shadows. 'You are not my son,' he said quietly. 'And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.' Dorn turned and walked away.

Sigismund watched Rogal Dorn until his outline vanished into the gloom. Alone he knelt, gripping the hilt of the sword with both hands. He breathed slowly, resting his forehead on his gauntlets. The darkness of the Investiary surrounded him. His pulse slowed. He thought of all the battles he had fought, all the enemies cut down by the sword he knelt before. The restless ferocity, the focus of complete certainty guiding his every blow; all gone, all wiped away by his choice on the *Phalanx*.

'You have questions,' she had said. She had just been standing there, quiet, still.

'No,' he had said. She had smiled. He had been going to order her back to her quarters but the thought seemed to fade in his mind, to be replaced by… questions. 'How will this end?' he had said. He did not know where the question had come from, or why it had come to his lips now. But as he said it he knew that it was the reason he had wandered the decks of the Phalanx *while his father brooded and raged.*

'As it must,' she had said.

The sword felt unfamiliar in his grip, as if the weapon that he had borne for decades was his no longer.

You are not my son.

'You will be needed before the end,' she had said. 'Your father will need you.'

He raised his head. Above him the stars were crystal fragments against sable.

‘You must bear whatever will come,’ she had said.

I am still alive, he thought, *and I still serve*.

He stood, pulling the sword from the stone floor; its edges glittered like sharpened obsidian.

‘I will not fail,’ he said. In the quiet of Terran night the words sounded like a vow.

Above him, Sigismund could hear the shrouds of traitors flapping in the wind.

The day of the Battle of Phall

The Phall System

I was with Calio Lezzek when it began. The old astropath had been teetering on the edge of death ever since the psychic onslaught had washed through the Phall system. Barely conscious, he could do little more than mutter a few words of greeting. Each day that I visited him he was weaker, a step closer to death and further away from life. He often slept, his acolytes wiping mucus from his lips as he twitched in the grip of dreams. I am not sure why I visited. Perhaps it was guilt, or maybe because he was the only person on the *Tribune* who did not look to me for purpose and strength.

On that day Lezzek had not woken, and I had been about to go when his hand gripped my arm. I looked at him. His mouth was moving, cracked lips trying to form words. I leant forwards, dipping my ear close to the old astropath's mouth. His lips moved but I could hear nothing. I leant closer. Lezzek took a breath that rocked his entire body but when he spoke it was in a whisper that only I heard.

'They are coming.'

He went still and collapsed back onto his pallet. I straightened. I knew what it meant. The bow wave of ships approaching through the warp presses on the minds of psykers. They can feel a large ship or fleet draw close, like lightning rods sparking before a storm breaks. A dead ice feeling had numbed my body. My thoughts felt sluggish as I turned to the door. I had taken no more than one step when the sirens began to call.

She is a good ship, thought Pertinax. Only three decades had passed since *Hammer of Terra*'s burnished hull had slipped the docks of Mars. Some amongst the Legion said that these Martian craft had a more aggressive temperament than those of Inwit, as if their character mirrored the more impatient age into which they were born. Pertinax never thought of his ship in such terms. To him she was as she was, and he knew her every quirk and strength.

The bridge below him moved with order and precision. Servitors whispered to cogitators in clicking whispers. Human officers exchanged spoken orders, data-slates and spools of parchment. Tech-priests crouched in their bronze niches, silent until the machine heartbeat of the ship required their attention. The bridge

was the mind of a warship, and the vessel it controlled was a battle-barge. Eight kilometres long, crewed by thousands of serfs and servitors, its weapons could pound civilisations to dust. She carried three hundred Imperial Fists, a might almost equal to that of her guns. *Hammer of Terra* was her given name, and like all of her kind she had a single purpose: to dominate war amongst the stars. A warship was made as much of flesh and discipline as it was of metal. That truth pleased Pertinax. It was an appreciation he knew he shared with Fleet Master Polux.

Though a few amongst the senior captains and battlegroup commanders might chafe at Polux's orders, Pertinax could not fault the fleet master. The fleet was vulnerable, and an attack was likely. In such a position one needed to create a solid defence and conserve fighting strength. Polux's deployment addressed all of these needs with a direct elegance. Pertinax had even favoured the younger fleet master with a nod of approval when he had seen the plans. The Retribution Fleet formed a sphere close to the ocean world of Phall II. Each commander in the fleet led a battlegroup of smaller vessels. Every battlegroup moved on a precise looped course. Together the whole resembled a cage spun from the tails of comets. The *Hammer of Terra* and its battlegroup of twelve lighter ships were on the outer surface of the sphere formation, close to the system's edge.

Close to the *Hammer of Terra*, the black sheet of stars bulged. Lilac and green light spread across the swelling distortion, as cracks spread across the void.

On the bridge of the *Hammer of Terra* officers began to call alerts; a second later alarms sounded from multiple areas. Pertinax took in the flow of information rolling across his augmented eyes and weighed the possibilities. Something was punching into reality from the warp. It could be an enemy, a friend or something unknown. Until they knew which it was all would receive the same greeting. He nodded once to himself and gave the order the ship had been waiting to hear.

'Battle readiness.' The *Hammer of Terra* shuddered in sympathy with the words. As he felt the ship wake to full life, Pertinax could almost see the plasma flushing into the exchange ventricles deep in the battle-barge's hull. The green glow of holo-screens and red of alert lights filled the bridge as metre-thick shields descended over the viewports. Pertinax knew his ship would be at full readiness in less than ten seconds. Ready statuses were already coming in from the dozen strike cruisers, destroyers and frigates in his battlegroup.

He looked towards a pict-image of the system's edge in time to see the stars fracture. A hole opened in space. Ringed with lightning, its centre a sickening

swirl of colour, it widened like a mouth opening to vomit. A vast iron arrowhead stabbed from the opening, dragging a vast crenellated hull behind it as it split the wound wider. It was a battle-barge, slab-hulled and dull-armoured. Weapon batteries lined its sides and serrated its spine. Pertinax recognised the emerging ship: her name was the *Contrador.* She was a capital ship of the Iron Warriors Legion. For a second his thoughts spun with confusion, his clarity failing at the sight of an old rival and ally.

The *Contrador* fired. Detonations spread across the *Hammer of Terra's* bow. Its void shields held, energy coiling across their surface in oily ropes. On the bridge Pertinax's voice was shaking with rage as he gave the order to return fire. The *Hammer of Terra* began to bring its own guns to bear.

Around the *Contrador* space bubbled like boiling tar as ship after ship burst into reality at the same moment. The first hundred Iron Warriors ships fired as one and the *Hammer of Terra* became a brief smeared sun.

When I reached the bridge the *Hammer of Terra* was already a spreading globe of gas and glowing debris. The warship's death filled the pict-screens, burning in silence above the hundreds of servitors and crew that filled the cavernous space. The sight of it made me freeze for a second, my eyes locked on the image. I thought of Pertinax, captain of the *Hammer of Terra*, a warrior who had already fought in a hundred campaigns by the time I became part of the Legion. I remembered his green augmetic eyes watching me steadily, and the soft accent of Europa that had never left his voice.

I shook my head, and the noise of the bridge washed over me. Officers were shouting at each other as servitors and machines spat out reams of data. Raln was at my side, already calling orders to the serfs. I needed to get hold of the battle before it spun further beyond my grasp, but there was one fact missing I needed to know.

'Who is the enemy?' I asked. Raln half turned to me, the red lenses of his helmet briefly meeting my gaze as he spoke.

'The Iron Warriors,' he said and turned back to issue a stream of rapid orders to the bridge officers. For a second I stood still, like a man with a bullet hole through him yet to fall. Then I nodded and snapped my helmet over my head.

The holo-projection above spun, showing me battlegroup and enemy positions, auspex readings and tactical data in growing clusters of glowing runes. Screeds of data from my helmet display overlaid the projection: inter-ship communication, links to the battlegroup commanders, the Legion-contingent

details from each ship. To a Space Marine not conditioned to process such levels of information it would have been bewildering. To a normal human it would have been overwhelming. I took a deep breath, felt the focused calm enforce itself through my body and mind. Training and conditioning blanked out every other instinct. I was the centre of a storm, a clear point of will and strength.

'Bring us above the plane of attack,' I called to Raln. I felt the ship judder. The holographic projection blurred and flickered for a second. I glanced back to the raw data of the battle that floated in front of me. Four minutes had passed since the *Hammer of Terra* had died. We had lost ten ships, thirty were crippled; forty-six had suffered severe damage. Ordnance had degraded to sixty-two per cent across the fleet. We were close to disaster.

The *Tribune* was taking fire. I could read it in the flow of activity on the bridge as if it were the movements of my own body. Shields were down across the forward batteries. Power had been diverted to bring them back up. Plasma reactors were straining to maintain output.

Inbound enemy bombers.

Batteries firing.

Dorsal line accelerators approaching optimal fire angle.

Turn at thirty per cent.

Course correction…

I let out a slow breath, and blanked out the details of the *Tribune*'s situation. I was the fleet master. The *Tribune* was under Raln's hand, and was only one part of the battle. I focused on the information in front of me; the hololithic projection was a tangle of trajectories and amber engagement makers.

The position was clear and chilling. The enemy fleet had penetrated a third of the way into our lines. Their formation resembled a jagged cone, the largest vessels set back from screens of escorts and heavy-hulled strike cruisers. It had punched into our fleet and was moving towards the centre of our spherical formation. To my eyes it looked like a fanged worm eating to the core of a ripe fruit. It was methodically brutal in its ugly efficiency. So typical of the Iron Warriors.

The Iron Warriors. Our enemies are the Iron Warriors. The thought was like a sliver of ice thrust into my guts, as if that fact had only just registered in my mind. They had scrambled their communications but I recognised their ships. These were vessels we had fought beside, crewed by warriors I had bled with and called brothers. *If the Iron Warriors were with Horus, then how many others might be as well?* Could more have turned on the Imperium? Terra might have

already fallen. The Imperium might already be no more. Our fleet might be the last fragment of loyalty surviving. The possibilities made my head swim, as if my mind was screaming after the dead Imperium as it vanished into an abyss. For a moment I felt the old crack in my strength, the weakness that had nearly made me curl up and accept death on the ice of Inwit.

I cannot fail now, I will not fail. My eyes flicked across the projected sphere showing the battle, green and blue smeared with red like leaking blood. The contingency plans I had made over the long months surfaced in my mind, aligned with the possibilities of the present. I could see it, a way not only of recovering but fighting back. *If we bleed,* I thought, *so will they*.

Thirty-six companies of Imperial Fists died in those first moments without seeing their enemy or firing a shot. They died running for assault boats, locked in the cockpits of Stormbirds and on the command decks of ships. They died without knowing the hand that killed them.

Within seconds of the death of the *Hammer of Terra* twelve of its sisters followed, consumed by nova-shell explosions and torpedo spreads. The grand cruiser *Sulla* fired a single salvo before macro-shell fire stripped its shields and its hull became molten slag. The six destroyers clustered around it ended in the explosion of its plasma reactor. The *Crusader* and *Legate* lasted scant seconds longer. They and their escorts took a trio of vortex warheads and vanished into the hungering dark.

Twenty-four grand cruisers and battle-barges made up the tip of the Iron Warriors fleet. In close formation around the *Contrador* they moved as one. They rammed through the debris of their kills, fire and molten metal smearing their prows. Turbolasers, macro cannon and plasma annihilators scoured the void around them. Bombers and assault craft swarmed through the void behind the warships, killing crippled craft with thousands of small explosions.

Seen from a distance the opening minutes of the battle would have been a scattering of bright flashes against blackness. Closer in, so that the planets of Phall loomed large, the view would have been of hundreds of gleaming shards moving in patterns and groups like swarming fireflies. It would still have been impossible to tell the difference between Iron Warriors and Imperial Fists, but after watching for a few minutes patterns would have emerged. The first pattern was an empty sphere, spun from the curving paths of golden ships. The second was a tapered wedge that grew longer and thicker as more ships pulled themselves from the warp. Where the two formations met explosions flared

brighter than the distant stars.

The Imperial Fists fleet fragmented under the attack. Flame-wreathed battle-barges pulled back, trying to outpace the guns of the Iron Warriors. Heavy cruisers staggered their flight, first one taking fire then the next, while faster strike cruisers tried to cover the heavier warships as they pulled away. As the golden fleet broke into pieces the Iron Warriors continued to press forwards. Smaller ships crippled targets, and then larger ships delivered the killing blows. It was methodical and merciless, like a siege drill eating through rock.

Directly in the path of the Iron Warriors a lone battleship turned to meet its enemy. Forgotten hands had made the *Oath of Stone* under the light of a sun far from Terra. It had been old before it served the Imperium, and it had aged in scars and honours since. Its guns blazed, filling the closing space between it and the enemy with fire.

Its target was a grand cruiser that bore the name *Stheno*. The Iron Warriors ship faltered, its void envelope peeling back as it pushed forwards through the storm of fire. Lance beams spat from the *Oath of Stone* and suddenly the *Stheno* was burning, a glowing gouge running from its spade-shaped prow to its fins. The *Oath of Stone* surged forwards to finish its kill, but the *Stheno* was only one ship amongst a closing fist of iron.

Three heavy cruisers fired. Energy crackled across the *Oath of Stone*'s void shields as they burst like oily bubbles. Shells and missiles hammered into the old ship. Its armour cracked and glowed. Crenellated gun towers sheared off, scattering clouds of stone and metal in their wake. Hundred-metre armour plates flaked off its hull. Deep inside the hull fire ran between compartments, suffocating those it did not burn.

Trailing wreckage, the *Oath of Stone* continued to close and fire on the *Stheno*. For a moment it seemed as if it would face down the might of an entire fleet and survive. Then a line of turbolaser fire cut its engines in two. Building-sized thrusters fell away as explosions kindled in the wound.

On its bridge a human officer stood. Blood covered his face and chest. He looked at the armoured corpse of the ship's master; the Imperial Fist had died with his hands still gripping the arms of the command throne. The man nodded as if to someone who was not there, and gave a single order to the surviving crew.

With the last of its momentum and guttering engines' power the *Oath of Stone* rammed the *Stheno*. It hit the grand cruiser in the belly, its prow ramming

through the iron ship's spine. The *Stheno* shuddered, transfixed like a fish on a spear. Gas and fluid sprayed from its hull. For a moment the two spun on, locked together in death. Then the *Oath of Stone*'s prow ripped free of the *Stheno*'s hull, and pulled the guts of the grand cruiser with it. Discarded and dying the *Stheno* drifted on, turning end over end, like a broken spear thrown at the night sky.

The rest of the Iron Warriors fleet did not even slow down.

His master was staring at the lights of battle as Berossus approached. The *Iron Blood* had no viewports. There was no need for them, or so Berossus had heard Perturabo say. Why would you need to look at the void? War in space was a matter of calculation, sensors and firepower. That or hacking your enemy apart in spaces so small you could smell their blood. Windows onto the void were a weakness indulged for vanity. In spite of this sentiment Berossus found his master on the deck of a launch bay, its blast doors open to the vacuum. A thin layer of frost covered the deck and walls and had crept up Perturabo's armour.

Berossus knelt, his breath loud inside his helm. He was aware that being adjutant to the primarch for this battle held danger as well as honour. He would never claim to understand the Lord of Iron, but he wondered if at that moment his master needed to see the reality of his fleet hammering the longed-for rebuke into the flesh of Dorn's sons. It was a triumph, but Berossus knew that his master had never been more dangerous than at that moment; he could feel it like a razor lying on his skin.

'Is the fleet fully deployed?' Vox-static laced Perturabo's voice.

'Forrix says that full deployment will be complete in twenty-seven minutes.' Perturabo turned to look at Berossus, the green slot eyes of his helm glowing above the plough-shaped snout; Berossus swallowed, even though he knew that the estimate was precisely in line with Forrix's previous calculations.

Around the *Iron Blood* hundreds of warships followed in close formation. Behind them hundreds more pulled themselves from the warp to add to the Iron Warriors fleet. Months ago scout units had captured details of the Imperial Fists fleet, each capturing a single snapshot of data and pushing it into the mind of the astropath slaved to each machine. The psykers' death screams had cut through the storms, carrying dream images of the Imperial Fists fleet. They had used that data to plan, and that plan was a timetable for obliteration. Berossus knew that the battle was progressing as intended, but under his master's gaze he wondered whether that was enough.

Perturabo turned his back to the view. At a gesture, the blast doors began to

shut over the fire-spattered vacuum.

‘Tell Golg to push the vanguard harder. The rest of the fleet can finish what he leaves.’

Berossus averted his gaze and knelt even lower as Perturabo spoke. ‘Yes, master.’

‘Scour the Imperial Fists signals. Find where Sigismund lurks.’ Perturabo pulled his helmet off as the blast doors sealed and atmosphere hissed into the hold. Berossus glanced up and wished he had not.

‘Yes, master,’ said Berossus, his gaze again on the frost-sheened deck.

‘He is to be found, not killed,’ rasped Perturabo. ‘His death is mine.’

The killing continued with murderous rhythm. The ships at the front of the Iron Warriors fleet had begun to split into groups to hunt smaller Imperial Fists ships. Behind them fresh arrivals advanced in a tight block. These were the macro-vessels, vast cliff-sided ships filled with battalions of Iron Warriors and thousands of slave troops. Beside them lurked the hell burners. Old system ships, orbital haulers and tugs, they had ridden through the warp on tethers behind the macro-ships. Unstable plasma fuel and munitions filled each of the ramshackle craft. Their slave crews, lobotomised into blind obedience, drove the hell burners into the throats of the Imperial Fists guns. Many detonated before they reached their victims, but more did not. Chains of explosions formed glowing nebulae that hung in the void like lava clotting in water.

The Imperial Fists ships that emerged from these infernos were half dead, their armour peeling from their superstructure, their weapons blind. The macro-vessels poured boarding craft onto the crippled ships as they limped from the firestorm. The Imperial Fists crews did not die swiftly. Swamped by thousands of slaves, they held until the Iron Warriors came to finish them in person. Dozens of ships died this way, gutted from within and left to drift, their insides filled with the dead of both sides. To the Iron Warriors the process of victory had begun and the only question was how long it would take to complete.

The first sign that all was not as it seemed was a bright explosion on the trailing edge of the Iron Warriors fleet.

The Imperial Fists cruiser *Veritas* and a destroyer wing cut towards their prey. Their target was a grand cruiser, a hulking brute named *Calibos*. The destroyers released a spread of fast-running torpedoes towards the Iron Warriors ship as they closed. It tried to evade but turned too slowly. Blisters of fire opened along its dark metal back. The destroyers accelerated past the injured ship. The *Calibos*

listed drunkenly, its course veering as the rest of the fleet pulled away.

The *Veritas* struck an instant later, its dorsal cannons crumpling the *Calibos*'s shields and punching through its carapace. Half dead, it tried to turn its prow towards its attacker. The *Veritas* raced past, broadsides raking the Iron Warriors ship. The grand cruiser exploded in a shockwave of energy and atomised matter. As the Iron Warriors fleet responded the *Veritas* and its strike group was beyond its reach and turning for its next attack run.

It was the first blow of many.

It is a truth that to stand at the heart of a battle is to see it only through a narrow slit. You see the gross shift and swell of destruction, and the tide of battle submerges all the small moments of death and heroism. The deaths of thousands become only texture to a greater picture, details that you cannot look at because if your attention slips it might mean total defeat. Command breeds callousness. To say otherwise is ignorance.

For me the battle was a blur of decisions, of losses and victories rendered in impersonal information and abstract projections. I existed above the fray, a set of eyes that saw and a hand that remade what was seen. And what I saw was that we were winning. For a moment the information almost overwhelmed me as my mind turned representation into raw reality.

Silent flame stained the black void. Armoured ships raked at each other with hot yellow claws. Void shields shimmered and burst. Nova cannon shells exploded like newborn stars. Attack craft spun and slid amongst the greater vessels like silver fish through black water. Iron and gold hulls glowed under converging lattices of energy; melted, split. Dead ships drifted, breaking apart into crumbs of flame-licked metal.

Another ship exploded. Plasma expanded to a bright white sphere. Golden armour turned to liquid.

A frigate spun like an injured bird, trailing flame. Lines of hot yellow fire found it and split it into glowing chunks.

Gull-winged bombers converged on a storm-grey cruiser, warheads sliding from under their wings. Pinprick detonations flared across the cruiser's spine, carving off augur and sensor arrays. Blinded, it began to list.

A strike cruiser roared towards a wide-nosed battleship, its shields slick with deflected fire. The battleship turned its flank to the strike cruiser, its gun ports like a murderer's eyes. The strike cruiser rolled, curved under the battleship's belly and fired. Macro-shells tore open layers of metal, spilling burning gas into

cold space.

A slab ship tried to turn its battered prow away from its attackers. A spread of graviton torpedoes hit it in its flank, burrowed deep and detonated. The ship shivered as competing forces pulled at its structure, breaking armour, cracking bulkheads. For a second it drifted on, quivering as its bones splintered and distorted. Then its spine broke and it crumpled as if crushed in an invisible fist.

It was what the months of planning had been for, the hundreds of hours of training. We were ready to resist an attack, but we were facing an enemy far greater than I had ever planned for.

The Iron Warriors had taken losses, but their strength remained. If we had broken in the first moments we would have died. If we tried to fight the Iron Warriors head on they would have slaughtered us. They knew our weaknesses, we theirs. They had hoped to find us unprepared, but we had not cracked after the first attack. Our defence had snapped back into place like the cogs of a clockwork mechanism. It was an unfixed fortress made of moving strike groups, fading resistance and punishing counter-attacks. Slower battleships drew fire, pulling Iron Warriors ships out of formation, while on the edge of the battle sphere fast strike groups looped around and through the margins of the Iron Warriors fleet. They struck again and again, crippling, destroying, trimming ships from the edge of the enemy fleet like fat carved from meat. As I saw our retribution unfold I think I may have allowed myself a grim smile.

The *Halcyon* dived through the battle storm. Its leaf-blade hull glowed with reflected light from explosions and weapons fire. The void was thick with debris and plasma clouds, tumbling together like blood and entrails sinking through water. The *Halcyon* fired as it dived, prow and dorsal weapons thrusting ahead of its path. Behind it two of its sister ships followed: *Unity* and *Truth*. They were smaller, knife blades to the *Halcyon*'s spear tip. They spun, their flank batteries spiralling a bright helix around them as they sliced through the Iron Warriors fleet. This near to the core of the Iron Warriors formation, the hulls of enemy ships were so close that the gunners could aim by sight.

On the *Halcyon*'s bridge Tyr watched as his target grew in size on the pict-screen. He preferred to see void war this way, enhanced and filtered so that he could see how enemies moved, fought, and died. It made it real, as if projections and the cold clarity of tactical data robbed it of its visceral truth. His target was an Iron Warriors battle cruiser, its hull studded with lance turrets, its prow an ugly wedge of scored metal. He knew its name: *Dominator.* Once, decades

before, he had seen it break the xenos lines above Calyx. Now he watched its shields flicker and vanish under his guns. The *Halcyon*'s rage hammered into the *Dominator*'s back. The *Dominator* turned and rolled, like a sea leviathan trying to shake free a harpoon.

'Increase firepower,' said Tyr. *This is what the abstract projections lack*, he thought. *They miss the connection with the enemy, the personal. They miss the point where you look into the eye of an old ally and ram the blade into their heart*. The deck lurched under his feet. Red light washed his face as warning lights filled the bridge. They were taking fire, of course. There were a dozen Iron Warriors ships so close he felt he could reach out and touch them. The *Halcyon* and its escorts were relying on raw speed and aggression to keep them alive. *That and more than a little luck*, Tyr thought and smiled grimly to himself. Polux had ordered Tyr and his battle group to strike into the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. They had lost two ships in three passes but killed four times as many. *A fair exchange*, thought Tyr as he flicked his gaze to pict-views of his two flanking strike cruisers. They looked like fire arrows falling through a forest, kindling an inferno as they flew.

Proximity sirens began to blare. Tyr turned back to the image of the *Dominator*. It filled the screen at minimum magnification. He waited until the proximity alert was a desperate shrill and then nodded to the helmsman. The *Halcyon* rotated on its axis, swooping under the *Dominator*, its flank batteries firing. The belly of the Iron Warriors ship split open in a string of explosions. The *Unity* and *Truth* followed close behind the *Halcyon*, hammering into the gaping gut wound in the *Dominator*'s hull. It disintegrated, plasma from its ruptured heart burning it from within. The *Halcyon* arced away from its kill, engines clawing for speed as it aimed for the edge of the battle sphere.

The Iron Warriors battle-barge came out of the surrounding swirl of battle. It fired as it came. Tyr felt the explosion shake the hull of the *Halcyon*. Clouds of flare static filled the pict-screens. The *Unity* vanished in a spread of detonations. Tyr could see a shape, a huge shape slowly resolving like a cliff coalescing from mist. Fifteen kilometres of cold iron and battle-blackened adamantium. Cooling trails of debris spilled from her flanks to drag in her wake. Her spine was a mountain range of gun fortresses and macro-batteries. Tyr felt his skin go cold. He knew her, had seen her once long ago, when she had been an ally. She was the oldest daughter of the ship forges of Olympia, a breaker of fleets and planets. Her name was *Iron Blood*, and only one being had ever been her master.

The *Iron Blood* fired again and the *Truth* followed its sister to fiery death.

Static blinded Tyr's view. He was shouting for full speed before the pict-screens cleared. Explosions chased their flight, shaking the *Halcyon* even as it outran the *Iron Blood*'s fury.

'Get a signal to Fleet Master Polux,' shouted Tyr over the shrieking sirens. 'Tell him the *Iron Blood* is amongst the enemy. Tell him Perturabo is here.'

For a moment I could not believe the words I had spoken. The battle projections and floods of information faded. I do not know whether I felt awe, or anger, or elation at what I had decided. Then Tyr's voice reached me through a fog of static and distortion.

'Brother?' he said and I could hear his shock through the obscuring white noise.

I refocused, the nearby battle data snapping back into my awareness. Two more runes marking enemy ships vanished in front of my eyes. The Iron Warriors fleet was pulling itself apart as it tried to engage us, and it bled at every turn. But that was not enough. Not enough for me, not enough for my lost brothers, not enough of a blood price for betrayal.

'Yes, Captain Tyr,' I said, my words reaching across the void on broken signal waves. 'My orders stand. I put fifty ships under your command.' A wash of white noise filled the pause. Tyr was thinking, judging whether to question or embrace my order. When he told me that Perturabo's flagship led the enemy fleet I do not think he expected such a response. He was my brother, but he never truly knew me.

'As you command, fleet master.'

I nodded once as if he could see me, as if he stood next to me rather than on the bridge of the *Halcyon*.

'For Dorn and the Imperium, brother. Your objective is the *Iron Blood*. Execute Perturabo.'

Grinding silence and gloom filled the throne room. Harsh, electrical light shone across the face of the Iron Warriors primarch. Across an oil-black screen the battle played out in bare numbers and raw tactical code. His face was unmoving, impassive, but his eyes held a spark of emotion that made Berossus wary as he approached his master. As the primarch's adjutant he had an unrivalled view of unfolding events. The insight was not heartening. The Imperial Fists had rallied and were inflicting casualties. Significant casualties. The Iron Warriors still had greater numbers, but that margin was diminishing. Berossus would have said that

the Imperial Fists might even have the upper hand. He kept the thought to himself; the news he bore was worrying enough.

‘Master,’ said Berossus and knelt on the bare metal deck. Perturabo turned his head slowly, his dark eyes fastening on Berossus’s bowed head.

‘Speak,’ he said, his voice a low rumble. Berossus continued to kneel, his helm held under his arm, his silent chainsword placed carefully on the deck beside him. He swallowed.

‘Master, we have identified the flagship of the enemy fleet.’ He paused and ran his grey tongue across his lips. ‘We have also identified the master of their fleet.’ He chanced a look up, met the primarch’s obsidian gaze and looked back to the floor. ‘It is a captain of the lower orders. Alexis Polux is his name. Sigismund does not command the fleet. As far as we can tell he is not amongst them.’ Berossus could hear only the rhythmic hiss of atmosphere exchangers and the rising beat of his twin hearts.

The first blow hit Berossus in the chest. Armour plate and bone shattered. One of his hearts burst. The second blow hit him as he spun through the air. He hit the wall with crushing force, slid down, blood oozing out of cracked ceramite. His body flooded with pain suppressors, but he could feel his splintered bones cut into his flesh. Blood filled his lungs and throat. He tried to breathe. Red foam drooled from his mouth and over his broken jaw. He was a bag of mashed meat held into the shape of a man by ruined armour.

Perturabo stood motionless at the foot of his throne, flecks of Berossus’s blood bright on his gauntlets.

‘Tell Golg to find this lesser captain that stands against us,’ said Perturabo. ‘Execute him and throw his corpse to the void.’ At the edges of the room ears heard and carried the order away. Perturabo turned and walked back to his iron throne. On the floor Berossus’s life seeped out of him into a slowly growing pool.

They assembled in the teleport chamber. Static electricity ran over Tyr’s Terminator armour, sparking between him and the metal skin of his brothers. Machines surrounded them, thrumming with restrained power. He could see tech-priests moving amongst them, muttering their clicking language as they made adjustments. Parchment tapers fluttered in the charged atmosphere. Focusing dishes, capacitor towers and arrays of arcane instruments all pointed in at Tyr and the squad that ringed him. They all wore Terminator armour, their bodies bloated by thick plates of plasteel, fibre-bundle muscles, and adamantium

exoskeletons. Out beyond the ring of machines other squads clustered on teleporter plates that spread through the chamber in concentric rings. Terminator armour was rare; the product of high artifice in a few Mechanicum forges. Amongst the Retribution Fleet there were enough suits to clad fifty-three brothers; all of them stood in teleport chambers waiting for Tyr's word.

Beside Tyr, Sergeant Timor brought his thunder hammer to rest against the snout of his helm. Oath parchments feathered the hammer's haft. Tyr knew that inside his helm Timor was speaking his oath of moment again. He felt a surge of pride. They were waiting to go into battle against another Legion, against a primarch. It was a battle none of them had ever thought they would fight, but there was no doubt or hesitancy amongst them. Polux had ordered this strike against Perturabo. That had surprised Tyr; he had thought that his brother lacked the boldness for such a gambit. That this mission might be his last did not matter. That was the nature of war, and the Imperial Fists knew that death was often the price of victory. The Emperor had created them to embrace that truth.

'Sixty seconds, captain,' said a voice in Tyr's ear. Tyr recognised the tones of one of the human bridge officers. The man's voice had a clipped edge. *An indication of focus and strain*, thought Tyr. It was to be expected. Outside the hull of the *Halcyon* the inferno-kissed void fled past them. Flanked by a dozen strike cruisers they were plunging into the heart of the battle sphere. In front of them frigates and destroyers converged on target vessels close to the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. By now they would already be engaging the enemy, wounding with nova strikes, spreading drifts of torpedoes to find what targets they could. Tyr had little doubt that the destroyers would not survive; he had said as much to their commanders when he outlined the plan. None had questioned their orders; they all knew the value of what they attempted. If they could inflict enough damage they would draw the *Iron Blood* into the engagement. After that the second element would strike from below the axis of battle. Fifteen warships would attack the *Iron Blood*'s escorts, killing where they could, and drawing fire where they could not. Its attention engaged and its escorts crippled, the *Iron Blood* would be open for the *Halcyon* and its strike group. They would deliver the true payload: thirteen hundred Imperial Fists loaded into boarding torpedoes and Stormbirds and waiting in teleport chambers.

It was wasteful and brutal but it had a chance of succeeding. *It must have worked so far*, thought Tyr.

'Thirty seconds,' said the voice again. Tyr blink-clicked an acknowledgement and opened a general communication channel to the rest of the strike force.

‘Brothers,’ he said. Across the chamber all movement ceased. His words would take longer to reach the squads on the other ships, but when they did hush and stillness would spread through launch bays and crew compartments. He had not considered what he would say. All his life had been war. Every moment since he had left the hive sumps of Nord Merica had been training, fighting, and pushing forward the bounds of the Imperium step by bloody step. He was not a man made to craft words, but they came to him then, as if something long wasted within him stirred to life.

‘We are fighting a war. Not a war of conquest, not the war we were made to fight, but a war for the oaths we made and the blood we shed to make the Imperium. We will never see the end of this war, but if by our deeds we can bring that end a step closer, if our deaths cost the enemy a hundredfold, then the future will remember us.’ He paused, felt the electric charge thickening against his skin. The machines were keening. Arcs of garish light played over the platform. Tyr brought his bronze-headed mace up to his face plate and closed his eyes.

‘To the glory of the primarch and the Emperor,’ said Tyr. The machines howled. A rolling flash of sickly light filled his vision and oblivion took him.

The cry made me turn. Calio Lezzek lay on the white marble of the command platform in a pool of his green robes. The last time I had seen him he had seemed on the edge of death, but somehow he had managed to walk to the bridge. I moved towards him, the projection of Tyr’s attack on the *Iron Blood* momentarily forgotten behind me.

The old man was shaking. Fresh blood ran from his eye sockets, repainting over brown stains. His lips were bright wet red in a parchment-pale face. His silver-tipped cane rattled on the smooth marble as he tried to stand. He slipped and started to fall again, and I caught his arm as he fell.

Lezzek was feather-light but I nearly dropped him as I touched him. It felt as if I had plunged my hand into hot acid. I blanked the feeling out and lifted him slowly to his feet. Deck officers and attendants were clustering around now. Behind me the battle spun on, forgotten and unattended.

‘Master Lezzek,’ I said. He did not reply. His body was shaking, fingers opening and closing. A thick red trickle ran down his chin. His lips were moving and a wheezing sound was coming from his mouth. ‘Master Lezzek,’ I tried again, but he did not seem to know that I was there. ‘Calio,’ I said, and his head turned.

‘I can feel it reaching towards us,’ he gasped. ‘I can see it, coming through the storm. Terra, it is burning.’ He moaned and shivered. ‘How can such…’ but the question died in his throat. His head arched back. I heard a crunch of bone. His mouth opened as if he was screaming but he made no sound. White-hot pain filled my hand where I held his arm.

He lifted off the floor, his flesh glowing from within as if his blood was on fire. He looked like a carcass suspended on a hook, arms and legs still twitching as they dangled. My grip broke, and the palm of my gauntlet was dark red with heat where I had held him. Ash fell from the old man, hair and silk charring and flaking from skin. A roaring sound spilled out of Lezzek’s mouth, like air sucking through a furnace grate. A booming, hollow voice came from the burning man, speaking the message that was killing him.

‘Sons of Dorn, return to Terra. Return immediately. This is the will of Rogal Dorn, Praetorian of Terra.’ Lezzek’s floating body shimmered as if I was seeing it through a heat haze. His head snapped up, his empty eyes fixed on me. For a second I thought that he was trying to tell me something, that he was trying to give me another message in that blind look. Then he spoke again. ‘Return to Terra. This is the will of Rogal Dorn.’ His lips blackened, and bright yellow flames poured out of his mouth and wreathed his head. His thin flesh blistered and boiled. For a second he was a black silhouette of a man at the centre of an inferno. Then the shape collapsed into a heap of embers and the flames vanished.

My mouth was dry. *Return to Terra. This is the will of Rogal Dorn.* The words felt leaden, like chains fastening around my hands. I half heard the shouts of bridge officers, and the mechanical sound of servitors moving to douse the remains of Calio Lezzek that still smouldered at my feet.

Word from Terra. Astropathic messages require careful interpretation to sift meaning from the mystery of their dreamlike content. It can take days and even then not be clear. For a message to imprint so clearly and directly onto Lezzek’s mind it must have held staggering power. We had waited months for a message, for any message. Now we had it and it felt like a judgement of execution. I glanced back to the holo-projection where our fleet and the Iron Warriors met in battle. *We were winning*, I thought. *We could deal a wound to the enemy so severe that the Iron Warriors might never recover.*

This is the will of Rogal Dorn.

Withdrawal. Flight. The price would be terrible and even then those that did survive would be running to find a storm’s grave in the warp.

A human serf officer moved towards me, saluted. It was one of the

communication officers. Interface cables ran from the base of his skull to a sliding track on the roof above. His eyes were green slit augmetics. I nodded an acknowledgement.

‘My lord,’ he said, and I could hear the edge of fear in his voice. ‘Reports from all fleet elements. Most of the astropaths are dead, a few live… barely. They all spoke the same message before they died.’

I looked down at the scorched patch of marble. ‘Yes, we received the same message.’ To punch through the warp storms and kill a fleet’s worth of astropaths the message must have been less a sending, more a tidal surge of psychic energy. No matter how it had reached us, the message was undeniable, its meaning not open to doubt.

Has the war reached Terra already? The possibility filled my mind. *What if the Iron Warriors were not the only new allies of Horus? What if Terra is falling and we are being called back as a last defence?*

I thought of Tyr, of the force I had committed to a bold strike, and the hundred carefully balanced engagements spread across the battle sphere. The message was a blow more fatal, more carefully timed than any ambush. This battle would not end quickly; we could not continue and obey the urgency of the order. There was no neat way to unpick an engagement on such a scale. Withdrawal meant sacrifice.

I remembered a hand locked around mine, blood coating both. Helias’s eyes looked back into mine out of the ice cold of the distant past.

‘Navigator Primus Basus reports that a passage seems to have opened in the storms, though he is not sure it will last.’ The words chilled me. If we were to obey we had to go while there was a chance of making it through the storms. I saw the abyss opening below my brother, waiting, silent, and eternal.

This is the will of Rogal Dorn.

I had a choice between loyalty and victory. Withdraw and I committed us to a loss greater than anything our Legion had suffered.

The will of Rogal Dorn.

‘Alexis,’ my brother had said in a voice so low that it was almost lost on the wind. He was always stronger than me. His hand opened in my memory and the darkness reached up to swallow him.

‘Signal all fleet elements to withdraw and jump to the warp.’ I closed my eyes. *The pain is how you know you are still alive.* ‘We are returning to Terra.’

Tyr swept his mace down. The Iron Warrior managed to move at the last minute,

and the blow hammered into his pauldron with a metallic thunderclap. Tyr could hear his own panting breath as he dropped his shoulder and rammed his weight forwards. The Iron Warrior stumbled. Tyr hit down, and felt the shock of impact through his armour. He could smell his own sweat, a thick and heavy stink inside his sealed battle plate. He hit twice more, heavy bludgeoning blows that left the Iron Warrior a bloody mound on the deck.

Beside him Timor slammed his storm shield forwards into the gap. Explosive rounds burst against its surface. Tyr brought his bolter up and fired into the space he had opened. They were in a corridor of dull metal barely wide enough for two of the Terminators to stand side by side. They had been fighting ever since they had materialised inside the *Iron Blood*; heaving, grinding warfare, fought with point-blank shots and grunting melees. The Iron Warriors gave no ground. The Imperial Fists had the advantage of numbers, but they were broken into a hundred small forces. As Tyr had expected, the inside of the ship was a labyrinth of defences: sentry guns, kill zones, and barricades manned by Iron Warriors who fought with brutal skill. Tyr had intermittent contact with the rest of the Imperial Fists on the *Iron Blood*, but he estimated that he had lost half already. Despite these losses they pressed forwards.

‘Fire wasp!’ shouted Timor. A bulky shape moved into view in front of them. Its curved armour plates were black with soot and striped with yellow chevrons. Blue pilot flames hissed at the tips of its weapon pods. A threat rune latched onto the machine, painting it angry red in Tyr’s eye. The fire wasp made a sound like an animal hiss and washed the corridor with liquid flame. Tyr’s helmet display dimmed, reducing his view to sun-bright patches of light and black silhouettes. Targeting runes hazed and pulsed in his sight as the heat baffled his armour’s sensors.

‘Navarra, clear the tunnel,’ shouted Tyr. Navarra came forwards, the barrels of his weapon already spinning to life. It was a new pattern of weapon, retrofitted to a few Terminator suits from the larger type fitted to Dreadnoughts.

Assault cannon. The designation was not new, but never before had a weapon owned the title so completely. Navarra moved past Tyr, fixed his stance, and levelled his weapon. The barrels keened as they rotated to a blur. The fire wasp came forwards, spraying flame. Navarra fired.

The torrent of glowing rounds hit the fire wasp head on. Its armour distorted under the deluge, buckling and cracking like paper in rain. A round hit a fuel tank and the corridor vanished in a fireball. Navarra kept the trigger depressed, panning the weapon across the burning corridor. Shell casings piled at his feet.

A sudden blast of static and garbled speech filled Tyr's helmet. Someone was trying to signal them from outside of the *Iron Blood*. He tried to latch on to the signal but could hear only static. *No matter*, he thought. *There is only one way for us to go*.

Navarra's assault cannon spun to silence, its barrels glowing red. The corridor in front of them was clear.

'Forward,' said Tyr; and they marched forward, towards the *Iron Blood*'s heart and towards Perturabo.

When it came, the order to withdraw spread like poison through the Imperial Fists fleet. The first to run were the smaller craft, the frigates, gunboats and strike cruisers. Alone or in small squadrons, a hundred and thirty of the proudest warships of the Imperium fled the sphere of battle. Every Imperial Fist on every ship knew what the fleet master was doing, and why; it was a judgement of who was most likely to survive. It was also a death sentence for those that remained.

Behind the fleeing ships their heavier cousins fired on the enemy with renewed fury. Rolling fire hit every Iron Warriors ship within range, clouding their sensors with a haze of energy as munitions detonated against void shields. It worked for a while, until the first of the Imperial Fists dropped into the warp. For a moment nothing changed. Then more of the fleeing ships vanished, and the Iron Warriors realised what was happening. They fell on the breaking Imperial Fists like starved jackals on wounded lions.

A second wave of Imperial Fists craft began to run for the system's edge and the warp's embrace. The *Lacedaemon*, the ship that had carried the first Imperial Fists beyond the Sol system, was the first to break away. Its captain, the obedient Iago, pushed his ship until its engines bled raw plasma. Twelve Iron Warriors ships ran him down, raking the *Lacedaemon* with constant fire. Its hull blasted to a twisted ruin, the *Lacedaemon* fired back on its killers until the last inch of its hull integrity gave out. Of the rest of the second wave of retreat, a handful made it to clear space and jumped to the warp. Most followed the *Lacedaemon* to death.

The *Veritas* began to fall. Scything blasts of fire cut its golden hull, slitting its skin open, spilling its guts into the planet's atmosphere. Its remaining engines fired, trying to pull it from the planet's grasp. Its killers fired again, shearing its engines from its body. It tumbled end over end as it surrendered to gravity, burning and shedding debris as it fell through the atmosphere.

It hit the ocean of Phall II like a hot iron plunged into a pool. Steam spewed into the air, spreading into a white anvil head. It took three seconds for the seawater to reach the plasma reactor. The wreck exploded, and a wave of glowing energy chased the tsunami already ripping out from the impact. White steam and black smoke bloomed out, mingled, clouding the atmosphere of the world like a cataract forming over a blue eye.

On the *Contrador* Golg hissed as he watched the image of the *Veritas*'s death. Its end was a fitting one for the sons of Rogal Dorn. But it was only a brief diversion, a kill of opportunity as he searched for his true target. He did not have to look far. There it was, standing defiant amidst a scattering of ships. *Tribune*: a name that carried so much of the arrogance and pretension of the Imperial Fists. His master had ordered him to kill the upstart commander of that ship who dared to stand against the Lord of Iron. He would do it, but there would be little satisfaction in the deed.

The battle had become a slaughter. The Imperial Fists were running. Squadrons of ships tried to keep the Iron Warriors at bay while the others made for clear space and the possibility of escape. Freed of the pressure of attacks, the Iron Warriors fell on them. Every passing instant saw another ship die under Iron Warriors guns. They simply hammered them into twisted metal and cooling slag. There was an abandon to it, a wasteful brutality that required no skill. But the Imperial Fists died just the same.

Golg felt nothing, no victory of superiority, just the bitter taste of blood from an enemy that had let himself die. This was supposed to be more than a massacre; it was supposed to be vindication, a proof of the lie of old pretensions and rivalry. Instead it had become simple butchery. Golg wondered if the primarch saw it in the same way, if his bitter anger was as terrible as Golg suspected.

Golg's eyes narrowed on the *Tribune*. This kill would be terrifyingly easy, but he had to be sure that he completed his task, or risk his master's anger.

'Close on the target,' he whispered. Officers and servitors moved to obey. 'Cripple it and prepare for boarding.' He had three hundred Iron Warriors on the *Contrador* alone, more than enough to bring Perturabo his prize.

I have killed us all. It was all I could think. The dying moments of thousands of my brothers clogged the holo-projection with blood-red light. I had tried to pick the battle apart, pulling elements back one at a time, diverting, covering, protecting. The Iron Warriors had felt the weakness and pressed their attack. The

withdrawal had become an ugly brawling battle, then a rout, then a slaughter.

The enemy had hit the *Tribune* twice since the withdrawal had begun. Both had been substantial impacts. The bridge was a ruin. Half the human officers were dead. Fused cogitator units sparked and bled smoke. Air hissed from ragged punctures in the armoured shutters. Servitors hung from the cables linking them to their stations. Oil and blood poured from them onto the deck.

'Three close proximity targets,' shouted Raln. He was gripping the main ordnance dais, the body of its dead officer slumped at its side.

'Fire on all targets,' I said, my helmet amplifying my words over the sound of a dozen overlapping alarms. The ship shook and shook again as we fired. I had given the order to withdraw but I would not run until the last moment. The *Tribune* lay across the path of the onrushing Iron Warriors fleet. Beside us were two grand cruisers, a trio of battle cruisers, and twenty strike vessels. A substantial force, but it was a paper fortress in the path of a storm.

'Two targets hit,' says Raln, his voice loud but calm. 'Two more targets reaching close range. One reads as being of battle-barge displacement.'

'Fire on damaged targets.' I turned back to the projection of the battle. Blurring interference washed through it. I watched as some of our ships reached clear space and vanished into the warp. *Too few*, *far too few.* Even as I watched a mass of Iron Warriors ships broke three of ours into glowing debris. A fourth turned to fight and died even as it fired. I looked to the bloated threat marker of the *Iron Blood*.

'Try and reach Captain Tyr again.' There had been no word from Tyr since he launched his assault on the *Iron Blood*. The green-eyed signal officer was bleeding, half his face glossed in fresh blood, but he nodded and moved his fingers over his lectern.

'Target hit,' called Raln. 'Fire inbound.' The ship shook again. 'Shields gone.'

'We have a signal, lord.' The signals officer was speaking into my ear via my helmet vox. A distortion-wracked voice filled my ears.

'Fleet master,' Tyr was shouting. I could hear a grating sound, like hail on a metal roof. It was the sound of gunfire ringing on his armour.

'There is word from Terra. We are to return immediately.' I heard a chop of static and a sound like a hammer striking a cracked bell. 'I have given the order to withdraw. Pull your forces back and–'

'To where? Pull back to where?' Laughter edged Tyr's voice. I looked at the battle projection, at the rune representing *Halcyon* trying to get clear of the centre of the Iron Warriors fleet. 'I am not retreating, brother. I am going

forwards. I am going to kill our enemy.' He had always been headstrong, reckless even, and he had never liked me. I smiled at that moment.

'Good luck, my friend,' I said. For a second the only answer was the rain-patter ringing of Tyr's armour.

'And you, Alexis,' he said and cut the link. I blinked, for a moment looking into the memory of Helias's eyes as he prepared to let the abyss take him.

The impact shook the *Tribune* and threw me to the floor. The armoured shutters blew in. Glass and metal spun through the bridge. Air howled from jagged holes in the hull. There were suddenly dead men and women everywhere, in pieces, bleeding in floods, gasping for vanishing air. My armour began to chime with atmosphere and pressure warnings.

'Multiple hits,' shouted Raln, still somehow at his dais. 'Primary engines failing. Enemy battle-barge on boarding trajectory.'

'Turn us to show our port flank to the enemy,' I said as I got to my feet. 'Order Imperial Fists elements into Stormbirds and transport craft. Get them outside of the ship on the protected flank.'

'And you, lord?' said Raln.

'Tell the enginseers that we are coming to the machine decks.'

The *Contrador* and *Tribune* met in an embrace of fire and punctured metal. The *Tribune* fired every remaining weapon at the closing Iron Warriors ship. Macro-shells, lance beams and plasma jets flicked across the narrowing distance and broke over the *Contrador*'s shields. The return fire blew out the *Tribune*'s gun decks and gouged a long wound in its side. The *Contrador* closed until it was drifting alongside the *Tribune*'s wounded flank. Assault pods and boarding torpedoes slid across the gap. A weak flurry of turret fire reached out to meet the swarm of assault craft and hammered a handful into wreckage. The rest came on, unconcerned and undeterred. They hit in a wave, punching through gold-plated armour and disgorging their cargo into the guts of the *Tribune*.

I saw none of this but I felt each part in the dying trembles of my ship. The Iron Warriors were aboard the *Tribune*, hacking and bludgeoning their way deeper and deeper inside. The resistance was scattered but determined. Weapon servitors stood at junctions, filling the space in front of them with streams of bolter shells. Our human crew stood their ground with shot cannons and lasguns. Amongst them a handful of my brother Imperial Fists moved between the fiercest battles. That had been the hardest part, speaking to those who had to remain. All understood, both human and Imperial Fist alike; the Iron Warriors

had to think we were resisting and that they were crushing us to nothing. The *Tribune* was dead, but I was going to claim its death price.

‘Ready?’ I said. Beside me Raln hefted a tall shield of scarred plasteel and glanced around at the remaining brothers of my company.

‘Ready,’ he said. I nodded and looked to the red-swathed figures of the *Tribune*’s enginseers. They bowed their hooded heads in a synchronised gesture of assent. ‘Thank you,’ I said, feeling the inadequacy of the words. The enginseers made no sign of having heard me. I nodded, locked my plough-fronted iron helm in place, and opened a communication channel. What remained of the *Tribune*’s signal arrays would transmit my words to any of the fleet that still remained and could hear them.

‘This is the fleet master.’ My voice sounded flat inside my helmet. ‘The *Tribune* is lost, remaining units withdraw and jump to Terra as ordered.’ I paused, wanting to say more but not knowing what to say. ‘Endure, my brothers. No matter what, endure.’ I cut the fleet broadcast, and let silence hold for a second before I spoke my last order to the *Tribune*’s crew.

‘Now,’ I said.

On the external hull of the *Tribune* a hundred assault craft boosted into the void like a cloud of fireflies; the *Tribune*’s contingent of Imperial Fists leaving their fortress for the last time. The thirty members of my strike force were still beside me, waiting. I nodded to the enginseers. There was a flash of light and the *Tribune*’s teleport chamber vanished from around us. Precisely five seconds later the enginseers performed their last duty. They never questioned my order, never showed the slightest doubt or emotion at what I asked of them. I think I have never had more admiration for a human than I have for them.

The *Tribune*’s plasma reactors overloaded. I never saw my ship die but in my mind I still see it, as if the event burnt itself onto the retina of my dreams.

For a second the *Tribune* held its form, a golden fortress floating in black night. Then it detonated. The Imperial Fists still on board were vaporised and their Iron Warriors enemies with them. Tongues of plasma licked out from the sun-hot core. Vast lumps of armour plating rode on the growing sphere of hot gases. The blast wave hit the *Contrador*, and broke fields and burnt out its sensors and range finders. Our attack craft descended on it a moment later like the vengeful spirits of the dead.

The Dreadnoughts were made of dull metal, their curved torso plates marked by burnished iron skulls. Black and yellow chevrons slashed across their greaves,

and amber light burnt in their eyes. They stood to either side of iron doors whose surfaces were mottled and pitted as if their slab faces had been hung while still hot from the furnace. Broken corpses and shell cases lay in heaps before them. This far into the *Iron Blood* the resistance was not just punishing, it was crippling. Of the thirteen hundred Tyr had brought less than forty stood with him now. A few still fought in the rest of the vast ship, buying Tyr's force time. The rest were dead, their armour split, crushed or burned, their blood mingling with that of their enemies on the bare metal decks. But they were close, very close.

There was supposed to be a second wave. A battalion of Imperial Fists, Dreadnoughts and Legio Cybernetica maniples. It should have lent strength to the final attack on Perturabo's inner sanctum. That second wave would never arrive. Tyr knew that Polux would have withdrawn the ships carrying his reinforcements. Perhaps those ships would survive, but Tyr had his doubts. Withdrawal in the middle of a battle like this meant only one thing: a massacre. He understood Polux's decision, but the cost… the cost was beyond imagining.

Tyr was running, his mace held above his head. The first Dreadnought fired when Tyr was fifty paces from the door. The cylinder of glowing energy missed Tyr by inches and hit Timor in mid-stride. There was a high-pitched whine and the sergeant dissolved into an outline of bright light. The energy beam hit another Imperial Fist and reduced him to dust. Tyr's helmet display blanked out completely. He could hear the shriek growing louder and louder.

His display cut back in. The Dreadnought was still firing, the conversion beamer's coils pulsing and sparking. Tyr focused on the Dreadnought and selected his first strike.

The second Dreadnought raised one of its two hands and opened its palm. The graviton gun pulse hit Tyr and he slammed into the floor. He could feel metal distorting, servos and joints shearing under pressure as his armour crushed him. The Dreadnought with the conversion beamer kept firing while its brother moved forwards, its fingers flexing.

A spray of glowing rounds hit it from the side. Tyr could hear the sound of Navarra's assault cannon even over the scream of the conversion beamer. Gouged pits spread across the Dreadnought's sarcophagus. It turned into the deluge of fire, moving like a man leaning into a gale. Its face plate buckled, the metal glowing hot under the impacts. The armour cracked and suddenly the machine giant was leaking blood. Chunks of pulped meat showered from the Dreadnought as it split open. The graviton hold on Tyr ended a second before the Dreadnought hit the floor.

Tyr was off the floor, running, his crushed muscles screaming, his armour grinding. The Dreadnought with the conversion beamer turned to meet his charge. He brought the mace down on the conversion beamer's barrel. The ribbed focusing plates shattered. Arcs of energy cracked through the air. Tyr's second blow crashed into its right leg behind the knee joint. The Dreadnought brought its fist around as it fell, clenched iron knuckles swinging at Tyr's head. He buried the head of the mace in the Dreadnought's face. It collapsed with a sound of ringing steel and unwinding gears.

Tyr stood, breathing hard. He looked up at the waiting doors. They looked like they could survive a kick from a Titan. He turned to the remainder of his cadre. There were fourteen brothers in Terminator armour, another thirty in void-hardened Iron Armour. *Too few*, he thought. *Far too few.* But was any number going to be enough to kill a primarch?

'Melta charges,' he called. Men began to run forwards, unfastening charges as they moved.

The first one was level with Tyr when the doors began to open. Tyr turned, his eyes locked on the widening split in the rough iron. The doors peeled back into the walls with a sound like the inhalation of a metal god. He could feel the hairs rise on his neck. Something buried deep under his gene-forging and training told him to step back from the dark opening, to run. Behind him the rest of the Imperial Fists had gone still. He could see inside now. He saw the figure clad in dulled battle plate sat upon the sharp-angled iron throne, hand resting on the pommel of a hammer.

Tyr could feel the black eyes of the enthroned figure looking back at him. He raised his mace. Behind him his brothers began to move. Bright lines of tracer fire split the gloom. Tyr began to charge as Perturabo rose from his throne to meet him. Chains spilled from the primarch's layered war plate as he stood. Rounds sparked from the rivet-covered armour. His face was bare, his eyes oil-black. His hammer came up with him. Its haft was as tall as Tyr and its black head crawled with power at its master's touch.

Tyr was five paces away. He could feel his muscles bunching, his heartbeat slowing to a low focused rhythm. Behind Tyr his brothers followed, firing as they came, lighting his path, caging Perturabo in fire. Tyr gripped his mace with both hands as he swung it up above his head.

'For Dorn!' The shout began as the coiled power of Tyr's strike unwound. The primarch stood still, clad in iron, and cloaked in detonations. Tyr met the black eyes and saw something move in their depths, like a lightning flash seen on a

distant night horizon.

Perturabo spun the head of the hammer low and brought it up in a curved arc. The blow hit Tyr as his last step fell. The hammer's head crumpled his armour and crushed it into the pulped remains of his flesh.

Reality snapped into place around us with a roar of gunfire. We stood at the centre of a wide chamber lined with dull metal and lit by unshielded stab lamps. The residue of teleportation rose from our armour in gauzy coils of ghost vapour and steam. Our target was good; we were in a primary chamber close to the *Contrador*'s bridge and main command sections. I had expected resistance but had hoped that most of the Iron Warriors would have joined the assault on the *Tribune*. Its death should have claimed them all, leaving their own ship open to our counter-assault.

Like so many battles in so many ages, it was assumption that almost destroyed us.

Fire hit us from all sides. I heard the rolling explosion of bolt-rounds impacting against armour. Three of my men died as shots found eye lenses and punched through helmet speaker grilles.

'Shields,' I shouted into the vox. My men brought their boarding shields together, their edges touching those of the men next to them. Together we formed an unbroken circular wall of plasteel. Volley fire, disciplined and relentless, lashed against the shield wall. I switched to the optical feed from the front of my shield and saw the muzzle flare of bolters firing from loopholes in sloped metal barricades. Iron Warriors, dug in and waiting. Not all of them had gone to attack the *Tribune*. Even with the scent of the kill so close the Iron Warriors were suspicious, methodical fighters and had held some strength back.

I looked to my left. Raln stood close in to my shoulder, firing his bolter through the gun slot in his shield. He paused and turned his helmet to look at me.

'This is not going to be easy,' he said. I almost smiled.

'We need to move,' I said. The enemy did not intend to kill us with this fire, they intended to pin us in place. If we stayed where we were the Iron Warriors would wear us down and then bring up weapons that could break our shield wall. It was inevitable. It was what I would have done if I had been the Iron Warriors. Raln glanced through his gun slot.

'Enemy barricades on this side are three metres high with firing points every two metres. Crossfire will not diminish on approach.' He looked back at me. 'Advance on one barricade, remove it and work sideways along the lines from

there.’ It was a simple plan and under the circumstances the only one open to us.

‘They will be prepared for it,’ I said. Raln shrugged, a gesture that said everything about what we could do about that certainty. For a second I thought of what must be happening in the rest of the Iron Warriors ship. Our assault craft wave must have hit by now, and our brothers would be fighting for beachheads inside the ship’s outer hull. I opened a channel to the rest of my personal strike force. ‘Close formation, advance to starboard barricade.’ They needed no other instruction.

Our formation reformed as we charged, shields rising and overlapping to form an armoured wedge that moved as a single body. The enemy fire intensified so that we were pushing against a wall of explosions, muscles and discipline straining for every step. We slowed, our synchronised paces becoming driving steps. I was grunting with the effort of holding my shield up against the hammering impacts of bolt-rounds. Fire washed us, billowing through the chinks in our shield wall; I felt a stab of pain as the flames found the elbow joint of my shield arm. I discarded the sensation, and forced my legs to push forwards. I could see the barricade only three paces away.

‘Meltas,’ called Raln. I heard the shrieking whine as air super-heated along the path of the melta beams. Two ragged, glowing wounds opened in the Iron Warriors barricade. The incoming fire slackened. This was the most dangerous moment, the moment when victory or slaughter was decided as much by luck as discipline. We charged, reforming into two spear-shaped packs that drove at the gaps in the barricades. I was at the tip of one, shield raised, my power fist sweating arcs of lightning.

An Iron Warrior met me as I stepped into the glowing breach. He was fast and skilled. His hand gripped the top of my shield, and yanked it downwards as he stabbed at my face with his chainblade. I rammed my weight forwards. He stumbled, the teeth of his chainblade biting across the armour above my left eye. I moved the shield to the side and punched into the gap. The Iron Warrior’s chest plate shattered. He started to fall but I had already hit him twice more, crushing and pulping his face and gut. I stepped over his body. Behind me my brothers came through the breach firing to either side, spreading down the line like water pouring through a broken dam. I turned, looking for the knots of resistance. That small movement, the slight turn and drop of my head, saved my life.

The teeth of the chainfist carved across the top of my shield in a streak of red sparks. I started to turn, caught a glimpse of a shape, its bare metal armour bloated by augmetics. A kick stamped into my shield. The impact shot up my

arm. I felt muscles tear in my shoulder. I was still staggering when the chainfist carved my shield and arm in two.

I felt no pain, just a sensation of draining to the floor as shock flooded through me. Bright supernovas of light blossomed in front of my eyes. A tremble ran through me as my gene-forged physiology fought against the trauma. My vision swam. Something moved close to me, a simian shape of oiled metal that moved with a splutter of pneumatic hisses. I could hear a shriek of revving chain-teeth. The shape lunged. The chain-teeth hit the field of my power fist. I did not even realise I had blocked the blow. My vision snapped into focus.

The clang of arms and the roar of bolter fire filled the space behind the barricade. Around me my brothers surged against figures in armour the colour of bare steel. Bolters fired at point-blank range. Shields battered into limbs and helmets. A dark gloss layer of blood covered the deck.

The turning chain-teeth were inches from my face. My muscles and armour fought to hold it back. My enemy pressed the chainfist forwards. He was strong, monstrously strong. I could see the grey, pale skin of his face sunken into the collar of his armour. Pistons and cables bulged from his joints and dirty fumes coughed from the vents on his back. His eyes were pale, the pupils black pinpricks in irisless whites. A fragment of memory gave me his name: Golg. He had ordered the murder of my ship but had stayed on his own, not even coming to finish the deed himself.

He raked his chainfist back and I hammered forwards with a backhanded blow. He took a half-step back, the delicacy of the movement at odds with his bulk. The blow passed a hand's width from his face, and as my momentum sent my arm wide he brought his chainfist across my chest. Thick blood and yellow armour fragments sprayed from the teeth. I felt their hooked points part the metal of my breastplate and open my flesh to the bone. Blood washed down my chest; I could taste it in my mouth. My breath bubbled thick in my throat.

Golg gave a smile of relish. I stumbled back a step. Blood still flowed from the chewed stump of my left arm. I could feel the double beat of my hearts booming in my chest. A high-pitched ringing filled my ears. Strength was draining from me.

My vision was a frosted blur, as if ice covered my eyes.

The world turned dark and warm.

The pain faded.

The pain is how you know you are still alive.

I grasped the pain and it pulled me back into the moment with a silent howl.

Agony ran through my nerves, fresh, bright, *alive*. I could see.

Golg was looking at me with emptiness in his pale eyes. The chainfist descended towards me, its blood-
wetted teeth a pink metal blur. I brought my power fist up, palm and fingers open.

I caught the chainfist and closed my hand with a crack of thunder. Shattered metal teeth spun through the air. I wrenched my fist back, pulling Golg forwards. His face met my helmet with a wet crack of bone. I let go of his ruined chainfist and pistoned my fist into his head. His skull vanished in a spray of red pulp. He collapsed to the ground, and lay still.

My knees hit the deck but I did not feel it. Around me my brothers were pressing forwards, clearing the barricade spaces. Blood pulsed slowly from my chest and the severed meat of my left arm. There was a warm copper taste in my mouth. For a moment I knelt, a crimson warrior coated in my own blood and the blood of my enemies. Then the pain faded and the waiting abyss opened beneath me.

The killing began to slow. The Retribution Fleet was no more; only the crippled and dead remained. The Iron Warriors ships had stopped firing on their victims, as if the overwhelming firepower of the earlier battle had left them spent. Surrounded Imperial Fists remnants fired all they had into the face of their enemies. Some managed to strip the void shields off an Iron Warriors ship; some even put wounds into their hulls. But the Iron Warriors came on, shrugging off damage like a bull grox trampling a dog into the dirt. They swarmed their remaining enemies, their boarding pods clustering on golden hulls like ticks feeding on cattle. Their boarding parties struck plasma reactors, shutting them down and letting the ships choke to death without power. Life support systems, artificial gravity, and weapon systems went silent. Then the Iron Warriors left and the cold of the void reached into the lightless hulls to do its slow and silent work.

A few Imperial Fists ships remained, fighting to the last, a shrinking cluster of resistance that became smaller by the second. They fought to the death, firing on enemies with undimmed fury, covering limping comrades even as the Iron Warriors brought them down. When the *Tribune* exploded amongst the last Imperial Fists ships few of the Iron Warriors took note. Golg and the *Contrador* had their kill, and the primarch had the head of the Imperial Fist who had dared to stand against him. That the *Contrador* lingered at the site of its victory drew

no suspicion.

In the navigation cupola of the *Contrador*, Navigator Primus Basus shifted against the unfamiliar hardness of the bare metal chair. The Imperial Fists had locked the previous Navigator of the *Contrador* in the deep holds of the battle-barge, but he could still feel her presence on the unadorned and functional equipment. Behind him his two secondaries fidgeted in their seats. The journey from the *Tribune* had done nothing to settle their nerves, and they knew what awaited them once they were in the warp. A storm navigation was a terrifying thing. Even if the clear passage was still visible they would have to rotate through shifts to avoid gaze fatigue, or worse. Basus flicked a switch on the console and spoke to the air.

'Sergeant Raln?' There was a pause, a clicking whir of white noise.

'Yes, Navigator.' The sergeant's voice held none of its usual dry humour.

'We are ready.' He paused, sucked air through his teeth. 'Our destination is still the same?'

'Yes. Captain Polux's orders still stand.'

Basus nodded to himself, closed his human eyes and ran his hand over the aperture on his forehead.

'Very well, sergeant.' He cut the vox, and turned to his secondaries. Their green-flecked amber eyes were a mirror of his own. 'We make course for Terra,' he said.

The *Contrador*'s engines fired to full life and it moved away from the debris of its battle with the *Tribune*. It bled as it moved, its wounds trailing gas and ribbons of burning plasma. Damaged inside and out, half its crew dead, and its command seized by its enemies, it was a crippled warrior picking itself up from the battlefield. But it could still run.

By the time the rest of the Iron Warriors fleet realised something was wrong the *Contrador* was already beyond their range. Its engines breathed comet trails as it made for the edge of the Phall system, deaf to the signals that followed its flight. The Iron Warriors pursued until the *Contrador* ripped a glowing hole in the starfield and dived into the storms beyond.

Perturabo watched the calculations of slaughter play across the screen. His gaze held no sign of pleasure or satisfaction. Nothing else moved in the throne room or the long chamber beyond the doors. The blood had already clotted to a sticky dark film on his armour. The broken bodies of Imperial Fists lay on the floor

around him, their yellow armour so crushed and distorted that they looked like chewed lumps of metal and offal.

The Imperial Fists fleet was gone. Some had managed to flee and jump to the warp, but most now drifted in the void, shattered and blackened. The force that had boarded the *Iron Blood* was dead to a man. There was no enemy left to fight. The battle data scrolling past Perturabo's eyes told of a sudden and total victory. It also spoke of the likely outcome before the Imperial Fists' suicidal withdrawal. Perturabo let the truth cycle past his eyes once more.

The hammer blow reduced the screens to sparking wreckage, and the Lord of Iron stalked from the chamber in silence.

In a corner, Navarra's mangled body lay in a fold of shadow. His armour had mashed into his flesh, and his legs were gone below the knee joint. Inside the ruin of his helmet, Navarra's eyelids trembled and snapped open.

EPILOGUE

[time/location unclear]

We have been falling for an eternity, falling into icy darkness, blood and the shouts of despair following us into oblivion. Perhaps it has only been hours, perhaps years. I cannot tell.

The storm cradles us, its frustrated fury raging at the hull of the Contrador. *Some of the human crew have died. There has been violence. Some of the crew still hold loyalty to their Iron Warriors masters. It is to be expected. Others seem to have died of hunger, their bodies withering away to nothing. Perhaps it has been years. Perhaps we will fall through the storm forever.*

'Captain Polux?' It is Basus. The Navigator looks even more thin and pale than normal. Sweat beads his grey skin and red sores rim his true eyes. I look little better. The wounds are healing, but they still weep pus. Tubes attach me to a mass of machines and fluid-filled vials that follow me on suspensors. I wear a red robe darkened in places by blooms of dried blood. They had to cut me from my armour.

'Yes, Navigator?' My voice is cracked and dry. A thick tube sucks yellow liquid from my chest as I breathe.

'I have seen it.' His voice shakes as he speaks. 'It is there, just visible, faint but steady.' I think that I know what he means, but I will not hope. I flex the fingers of my left hand as I listen, then I realise that my hand is gone and that I am clasping a phantom memory.

'What have you seen?' I say.

'The light of Terra,' he says. 'The Astronomican. The storms are still strong but we can steer a course.' I hear the hope in his voice alongside the fatigue. He and his secondaries have been steering us through the storm currents for as long as we have been here within the warp. Hope, though, is a fragile skin over the truth of pain and sacrifice.

'Do it. Take us home.'

I stay awake until we complete the course. A command throne of dark metal

dominates the Contrador*'s bridge. It remains empty; I stand as I did on the bridge of the* Tribune.

The crew move around me. Time passes, perhaps hours, perhaps months, perhaps years. My lost hand glows with ghost pain. The Apothecaries tell me they can modify the doses of nerve suppressors to remove the pain until I heal. I told them not to. The pain is reassuring, a rock to cling to as we fall.

At last the journey is over. Raln stands with me as we prepare to see the lights of Terra again. I nod slowly, and Raln gives the order. Our stolen ship shivers as the curtain of the warp parts before it and we slide out into the light of a bright sun.

The screens suspended across the bridge flicker to life, showing us the world that has waited for our return.

I frown. Beside me Raln makes a sound like a snarl.

The planets turn under the light of their sun, half wrapped in darkness, half in stark light. Weapon platforms and void stations ring them in heavy chains. Ships move through the void. Some turn towards us even as we look at them. I feel shock and awe. The forces gathered here are the greatest I have ever seen. It is a star system made into a fortress, a seat of power and unbending might. It is a place I have seen before, long ago. Now it is changed. It has become something more, something that I do not understand.

I look away from the screen.

'This is not Terra,' I say.

Somewhere within me I see Helias fall again from my hand into the night, and hear my scream lost on the ice wind.

THE DARK KING

Graham McNeill

Where before there had been light, now there was only darkness. The hot, urgent pulse of near death surged in his veins, the bitter flavour of betrayal fully expected, yet wholly unwelcome. This was what it would come to, he knew, this was the inevitable result of naïve belief in the goodness of the human heart. Death filled his senses, blood coating his teeth and the sharp reek of it thick in his nostrils.

As though it were yesterday, long buried memories of years spent on the night world of Nostramo emblazoned themselves on the forefront of his thoughts: haunted darkness punctured by stuttering lumen strips that fizzed in the shimmering, rain-slick streets and the stillness of a population kept quiescent with fear.

From out of this foetid darkness had come illumination and hope, the promise of a better future. But now that hope was dashed as the bright lance of the future seared itself into his thoughts…

…the death of a world and a great eye of black and gold watching it burn…

…legionaries fighting to the death beneath a red-lit sky…

…a golden eagle cast from the heavens…

He screamed in pain as images of destruction and the end of all things paraded before his mind's eye. Voices called out to him. He heard his name, the name his father had bestowed upon him and the one his people had given him, in the fearful watches of the dark.

He opened his eyes and let the visions fade from his mind as the sensations of the physical world returned to him. Blood and salty tears stung his eyes and he looked over to the sound of voices calling his name.

Horrified faces stared at him in fear, but that was nothing new. Babble spewed from their mouths, but he could make nothing of it, the sense of the words lost in the screaming white noise filling his skull.

What sight could be so terrible? What could evoke such horror?

He looked down as he realised he squatted atop another, living, breathing figure.

A giant in torn golden robes, his bone-white hair spattered with gleaming ruby droplets.

A mantle of red velvet trimmed with golden weave spread out beneath him like a bloodstain.

Tanned, iron flesh. Opened and bleeding.

He took in the destruction wrought on the body beneath him, raising his hands, balled into fists. Blood dripped from his fingertips and he could taste the warm richness of the genetic mastery encoded into every molecule upon his teeth.

He knew this giant.

His name was legendary, his stony heart and mastery of war unmatched.

His name was Rogal Dorn.

He looked up again as he heard his own name, given voice by a warrior in the golden plate armour of the Imperial Fists who bore the black and white heraldry of its First Captain.

He knew this warrior too…

‘Curze!’ cried Sigismund. ‘What have you done?’

The emptiness of space shimmered in the glow of distant suns beyond the armoured glass, faraway planets and unknown systems turning in their prescribed arcs without thought for the dramas being played out on the stage of human endeavour. What did those who lived beneath these suns know of the Cheraut system and the blood that had been shed to pacify it in the name of the emergent Imperium of Mankind?

Curze stifled the anger such questions provoked, staring into his reflection with cold, obsidian eyes that resembled empty sockets in his pallid, sunken features. Lank hair hung to his neck like black ropes and spilled across his wide, powerful shoulders. He turned from his reflection, uncomfortable with the dreadful disappointment he saw there.

Glinting metal caught his sullen gaze: his armour, standing in a shadowed alcove on the far wall. He crossed the chamber and placed his hand on the skull-faced helmet. The gem-like facets of its lenses winked in the low light and the sweeping dark wings rose from its sides like the pinions of some avenging angel of night. The burnished plates were dark, as befitted the primarch of the Night Lords, each one contoured perfectly to his form and worked with gold edging that caught the starlight.

Turning from his battle armour, he paced the hard, metallic floor of the gloomy, cavernous chamber that confined him. Thick steel columns supported a great vaulted ceiling, its upper reaches lost in shadow, and the hum of the mighty starfort’s reactor beat like a pulse in the metal.

This aesthetic of functional austerity was typical of the Imperial Fists, whose artifice had constructed this mighty orbital fortress as a base of operations with which to begin the compliance of the Cheraut system.

The Emperor’s Children had held their traditional victory feast before the first shot had been fired and together with Fulgrim’s Legion and the Night Lords, Rogal Dorn’s Imperial Fists had broken open the defences of the belligerent human coalition that resisted the coming of the Imperium. Within eight months of hard, bloody fighting, the eagle flew above the smoking ruins of the last bastion, but where Dorn lauded Fulgrim’s Legion, the conduct of the Night Lords had earned only his ire.

Matters had finally come to a head amid the silver ruins of Osmium.

Pyres of the dead stained the skies black and Curze had watched his Chaplains orchestrating the executions of defeated prisoners when Dorn marched into his camp, his lean face thunderous. ‘Curze!’

Never once had Rogal Dorn called him by his forename.

‘Brother?’ he had replied.

‘Throne! What are you doing here?’ demanded Dorn, his normal, affable tone swallowed in the depths of his outrage. A phalanx of gold-armoured warriors followed their lord and Curze had immediately sensed the tension in the air.

‘Punishing the guilty,’ he had answered coolly. ‘Restoring order.’

The Primarch of the Imperial Fists shook his head. ‘This is not order, Curze, it is murder. Command your warriors to stand down. My Imperial Fists will take over this sector.’

‘Stand down?’ said Curze. ‘Are they not the enemy?’

‘Not any more,’ said Dorn. ‘They are prisoners now, but soon they will be a compliant population and part of the Imperium. Have you forgotten the Emperor’s purpose in declaring the Great Crusade?’

‘To conquer,’ said Curze.

‘No,’ said Dorn, placing a golden gauntlet on his shoulder guard. ‘We are liberators, not destroyers, brother. We bring the light of illumination, not death. We must govern with benevolence if these people are ever to recognise our authority in this galaxy.’

Curze flinched at the touch, resenting the easy friendship Dorn pretended.

Bilious anger bubbled invisibly beneath his skin, but if Dorn was aware of it, he gave no sign.

‘These people resisted us and must pay the penalty for that crime,’ said Curze. ‘Obedience to the Imperium will come from the fear of punishment, you know that as well as anyone, Dorn. Kill those that resisted and the others will learn the lesson that to oppose us is to die.’

Dorn shook his head, taking his arm to lead him away from the curious stares

their heated discussion was attracting. ‘You are wrong, but we should speak of this in private.’

‘No,’ said Curze, angrily shrugging off Dorn’s grip. ‘You think these people will bend the knee meekly to us because we show compassion? Mercy is for the weak and foolish. It will only breed corruption and eventual betrayal. Fear of reprisals will keep the rest of this planet in check, not benevolence.’

Dorn sighed. ‘And the hatred planted in those you leave alive will pass from one generation to the next until this world is engulfed in a war the cause of which none of those fighting will remember. It will never end, don’t you see that? Hate only breeds hate and the Imperium cannot be built upon such bloody foundations.’

‘All empires are forged in blood,’ said Curze. ‘To pretend otherwise is naïve. The rule of law cannot be maintained by the blind hope that human nature is inherently good. Haven’t we seen enough to know that ultimately the mass of humanity must be forced into compliance?’

‘I cannot believe I am hearing this,’ said Dorn. ‘What has got into you, Curze?’

‘Nothing that has not always been there, Dorn,’ said Curze, striding away from the mighty, golden figure and hauling one of the few remaining prisoners upright by the front of his tunic. He scooped up a fallen bolter and thrust the heavy gun into the prisoner’s trembling hands. Curze leaned down and said, ‘Go ahead. Kill me.’

The terrified man shook his head, the oversized weapon shaking in his hands as though his limbs were palsied.

‘No?’ said Curze. ‘Why not?’

The prisoner tried to speak, but was so awed by the terrifying proximity of the primarch that his words were unintelligible.

‘Are you afraid you will be killed?’

The man nodded and Curze addressed his warriors, ‘No one harms this man. No matter what happens, he is not to be punished.’

Curze turned and walked back towards Dorn with his arms stretched out to either side of him, presenting his back to the prisoner.

No sooner had he turned away from the armed man than the gun had been raised and the hard crack of a bolter shot split the air. Sparks flew as the explosive shell ricocheted from Curze’s armour and he spun on his heel to smash the prisoner’s skull to splinters with his fist.

The headless corpse swayed for a moment before dropping slowly to its knees

and pitching onto its chest.

‘You see,’ said Curze, his fingers dripping blood and bone fragments.

‘And what was that supposed to prove?’ asked Dorn, his features curled in distaste.

‘That any chance mortals get they will choose the path of dissent. When he thought he would be punished, he dared not shoot, but the moment he believed himself free from consequence, he acted.’

‘That was an unworthy deed,’ said Dorn, and Curze had turned away from him before he could elaborate, but the Imperial Fists’ primarch caught his arm.

‘Your warriors will stand down and withdraw, Curze. That is an order, not a request. Leave this planet. Now.’

Dorn’s eyes were hard as granite and Curze knew enough of his brother’s resolve to realise he had pushed him far enough. ‘When this campaign is won, you and I will have words, Curze. You have crossed the line and I will no longer countenance your barbarous methods of war. Your way is not the way of the Imperium.’

‘I think you might be right…’ whispered Curze.

And he had led his warriors from the field of battle, their dark armour rendering them as shadows in the ruins.

He wondered what might have happened had he taken the debate to its logical conclusion.

Curze shied away from the violence inherent in such a line of reasoning and ran a hand through his dark hair, feeling like a caged animal as the door to his chamber – his prison – slid open and a warrior in gleaming, midnight-blue armour entered. Through the door, he could see the purple-armoured figures of Fulgrim’s Phoenix Guard, their golden halberds and copper scale cloaks glittering in the wan light of the starfort.

Dorn and Fulgrim were taking no chances with his confinement.

The newcomer’s head was shaven bald, pale and angular, with hooded eyes of jet beneath a prominent brow and pugnacious jawline.

Curze nodded in acknowledgement at the sight of his equerry, Captain Shang, and beckoned him in with an impatient wave of his hand.

‘What news?’ asked Curze as Shang bowed curtly before him.

Shang said, ‘The Master of the Fists recovers, my lord. A lesser being than a primarch would be dead thrice over with the wounds you dealt him.’

Curze returned his gaze to the tracts of stars beyond the skin of the starfort, all too aware of the severity of Dorn’s wounds, having clawed them with his bare

hands and teeth.

‘Then I must await the judgement of my peers, is that it?’

‘With respect, my lord, you *did* draw the blood of a brother primarch.’

‘And for that they will demand blood in return, no doubt…’

He remembered Dorn coming to his chambers, enraged by the slaughters on Cheraut and incensed at what Fulgrim had told him – secrets Curze had told Fulgrim in confidence some days earlier. The fit had come upon Curze as the Phoenician had told him tales of Chemos, pitching him to the floor and wracking his mind with terrifying visions of a nightmare future of death and unremitting darkness.

Moved by Fulgrim’s apparent concern, Curze had confided in his old tutor, telling him of the visions that had plagued him since his earliest days on Nostramo.

A galaxy at war.

Legionaries turning on one another.

Death awaiting him at his father’s hands…

Fulgrim’s pale, aquiline features had remained stoic, but Curze had seen the unease that flickered in his eyes. He had hoped Fulgrim would keep his confession in confidence, but when Dorn had appeared at his door, he knew he was betrayed. In truth he had little memory of what had occurred after Dorn’s storming accusations of insult to the Emperor… The present had faded and the future had seized his mind with agonising visions of a galaxy locked in a cycle of unending war where the alien, the mutant and the rebel arose to feast on the rotting carcass of the Imperium.

This then was the future the Emperor was creating? This was the ultimate destiny of a galaxy where the fear of punishment was not the agent of control. This was the inevitable result of allowing weak men to craft the destiny of mankind and Curze knew that, of all the primarchs, only one had the force of will required to mould the new Imperium from the soft clay of its present form.

‘The time has come to forge our own path, Shang,’ said Curze.

‘Then this is the moment you foresaw?’

‘Yes. My brothers will seize this opportunity to be rid of us.’

‘I believe you are correct,’ agreed Shang. ‘My sources tell me there is talk, and not idle talk, of recalling the Legion to Terra to account for our methods of war.’

‘I knew it. Since they cannot kill me, the cowards choose to strike at me through my Legion. You see, Shang? They have been waiting for this opportunity for decades. They are weak fools who have not the stomach to do

what must be done, but I do, oh yes, I do indeed.'

'Then what is our course, my lord?' asked Shang.

'Fulgrim and Dorn may have betrayed me, but we are not without friends amongst the other Legions,' said Curze. 'But first we must put our own house in order. Tell me, what news of Nostramo?'

'It is as we feared, my lord,' said Shang. 'The regime of Administrator-regent Balthius has failed. Corruption is rife, criminals govern from the ruined spires of Nostramo Quintus and lawlessness is endemic.'

'Then I have no time to waste while small-minded fools decide my fate as though I am a lowly menial to be chastised.'

'What are your orders, my lord?' asked Shang.

'Ready our ships, captain,' said Curze. 'We return to Nostramo.'

'But you have been ordered to remain in seclusion, my lord,' pointed out Shang. 'Lord Fulgrim's praetorians and Dorn's Templars guard your chambers.'

Curze grinned crookedly and said, 'Leave them to me…'

Curze lifted the last piece of his armour from the shadowed alcove and raised it above his head. He turned towards the door of his chamber and lowered his helmet until the skull-faced visor connected to his gorget with a hiss of pressurisation.

His vision shifted subtly and his perceptions broadened as he blended with the shadows of the dimly lit chamber.

He slowed his breathing and stretched out his senses, the darkness a second home to him after so many years spent in its embrace as a predator on the weak and guilty. He felt a moment's regret that it had come to this, but he quashed such notions viciously. Doubt, regret and hesitancy were weaknesses others might suffer from, but not Konrad Curze.

His breathing deepened and the tenebrous chamber came alive to him.

Curze felt power in the darkness; the cold intellect of hunters and creatures of the night that killed beneath its cloak. Lethal instincts honed on a thousand battlefields were now heightened to undreamed of levels and would now serve him equally well on this one.

He spread his arms wide and a ripple of psychic force pulsed like the blast wave of an explosion with Curze at its epicentre. The hanging glow strips filling the chamber exploded in quick succession, detonating one after another in showers of pellucid sparks. Broken glass tinkled musically to the steel deck in a glass rain.

Sputtering power cables swayed from the ceiling, hissing and fizzing like angry snakes as electric discharge strobed blue across the room.

Hostile red warning beacons blinked. Cold light eased inside as the door opened and a handful of armoured warriors stood silhouetted.

Curze leapt straight up, gripping the open lattice structure of the nearest column and swinging himself up into the deeper darkness of the chamber before the light could reach him. His legs swung around the column and he climbed higher as the warriors spread out with their halberds extended before them.

He heard them call his name, their voices echoing in the darkness.

A twist of muscle and he was airborne, a glimmering shadow of dead stars and extinction. The warriors below would have the senses of their battle plate to penetrate the darkness, but they paled in comparison to those of the Night Lords primarch. Where others saw only light and dark, Curze saw all the myriad hues and shades that were invisible to those who had not become one with its fuliginous depths.

One of the Phoenix Guard stood directly beneath him, scanning the chamber for its captive occupant, unaware that his doom lurked in the shadows above.

Curze spun around the column, looping lower with each revolution and holding his hand out like an axe blade. The warrior died with his head sliced cleanly from his shoulders, the iron flesh of the primarch smashing through his armoured gorget. No sooner was the blow delivered than Curze was in motion, swooping through the darkness like a shadow.

Cries of alarm echoed as his gaolers realised he was amongst them, stabbing beams of helmet lamps crisscrossing madly as they sought to pinpoint his location. With skill borne of decades spent as a murderous hunter of men, Curze ghosted invisibly between the beams of light.

Another warrior fell with his torso ripped open, blood squirting from torn arteries like ruptured pressure hoses. Gunfire split the darkness, starbursts of muzzle flashes, as the warriors opened fire on their unseen attacker. None came close, for wherever they fired, Curze was already far from harm’s way, spinning through the air like a malignant phantom and twisting between the bolts and wildly slashing blades.

One of Dorn’s Templars backed towards a pool of light and Curze slid through the darkness towards him, moving impossibly silently for an armoured warrior. A sensation unlike anything he had felt previously danced in his blood and Curze savoured it as he understood it for what it was.

Contrary to Guilliman’s rash pronouncement, it seemed Space Marines *could*

know fear…

This fear – such as it was – was something to be treasured. Mortal fear was a rancid, sweaty thing, but this… this was caged lightning in the marrow.

Curze pounced towards the armoured Templar, one of Dorn's best and bravest.

Veteran or not, he died as any other man did – in blood and agony.

'Death haunts the darkness,' shouted Curze. 'And he knows your names.'

He could hear frantic calls for reinforcements, but the superior systems of his own armour easily jammed them as he took to the air once more and vaulted from shadow to shadow.

'No one is coming,' he said. 'You are going to die alone here.'

Spraying blasts of gunfire followed his pronouncements as the warriors sought to pinpoint his location in the darkness.

But Curze *owned* the darkness and no matter what light or senses these warriors depended upon, they were not nearly enough to stop him from killing them. He could see the survivors – a Templar and two of the Phoenix Guard – backing towards the door. They now realised this was a fight they could not win, but had made the mistake of thinking that a fight with Konrad Curze was one you could walk away from. Laughing with the joy of the hunt, a pleasure he had forgotten without worthy prey to test him, he soared through the air and dropped into their midst like an assassin.

His fist punched through the armour of the first Phoenix Guard, and Curze wrenched his victim's spinal column out. Leaving the bloody curve of crushed bone protruding from the gaping wound, he snatched the dead warrior's halberd and dropped to the floor as the other warriors turned towards the agonised scream.

Before they could react, Curze swept the halberd out in a wide, circular arc, the blade twice the width of a handspan above the deck. The energised edge cut through battle plate, meat and bone with a searing, electric tang.

Both warriors fell to the deck, grunting in pain as they collapsed onto the bloody stumps of their legs. Curze hurled his stolen halberd aside and blocked a return strike from the fallen Phoenix Guard.

He snapped his enemy's weapon in two and jammed the splintered ends through his chest.

The Templar roared in anger, managing to get off a shot before Curze was upon him. He ripped the weapon from his victim's grip and planted one knee on his chest, the other on his left arm.

The pinned warrior reached up with his free arm to strike at him.

Curze caught the blow and ripped the arm from its socket.

Emergency lights began to kick in with a rising hum and thump of relays, and the chamber was suddenly illuminated with a harsh, white glow that dispelled the shadows and banished the darkness.

Where before there had been darkness, now there was only light.

And what had once been a place of imprisonment was now an abattoir.

Curling arcs of blood spray coated the walls and floor, and shattered, headless, limbless bodies lay strewn about like spilled surgical waste.

Curze smiled at the scene of slaughter and the persona he had worn like a disguise since he had first knelt before his father fell away like a discarded mask.

Now he was no longer Konrad Curze.

Now he was the Night Haunter.

Night Haunter turned over the last card and his jawline tightened as the familiar pattern emerged once more. The strategium of his flagship was kept dark, the faint blue light of consoles and hololithic displays islands of light in the darkness. The Primarch of the Night Lords paid no attention to his surroundings, ignoring the pregnant pressure of anticipation that bristled from every member of his bridge crew.

A deck of worn cards sat on the softly glowing lectern before him, their edges scuffed and curled from decades of shuffling and dealing. Little more than a parlour game played by the indolent rich of Nostramo Quintus, he had since discovered that variations of these cards had been employed in the hives of Merica and by the tribes of the Franc as a means of divination in the time before Old Night had descended.

The cards apparently corresponded to the stratification of society at the time, with the various suits representing warriors, priests, merchants and workers.

Ancient belief held that the future could be read in the patterns of cards known as the Lesser Arcanoi, but such traditions were outmoded concepts in this colourless, secular galaxy…

Except that no matter how thoroughly he shuffled the cards and dealt them on the polished glass of the lectern, the pattern was always the same.

The Moon, the Martyr and the Monster lay in a triangular pattern. The King lay reversed at the feet of the Emperor on one side of the pattern, and on the other, also reversed, was the Dove – a card academics postulated was a symbol of hope. The card he had just dealt sat at the top of the pattern, a card that had changed little over the centuries and the meaning of which, though often

misinterpreted, was unmistakable.

Death.

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Captain Shang approaching, clad in his battle plate and wrapped in his ceremonial black cape of gleaming patagium. His helmet's flaring wings framed a death mask of an alien skull, its tusked lower jaw thrust beyond his throat.

Behind his equerry, Night Haunter could see the gently rotating orb of Nostramo displayed on the viewscreen. Thick clouds of pollutants ringed the grey planet, shot through with emphysemic yellows and leprous browns. The radiation-blasted moon of Tenebor was just visible as a sickly orb emerging from the stained-lung corona of Nostramo's dying sun.

'What it is, captain?' asked Night Haunter.

'Word from the Choir chambers, my lord.'

Night Haunter chuckled mirthlessly. 'My brothers?'

'It would appear so, my lord,' said Shang. 'The astropaths sense a psychic bow wave that appears to indicate a great many vessels approaching through the Empyrean.'

'Dorn,' said Night Haunter, returning his attention to the cards before him.

'Undoubtedly. What are your orders, my lord?'

Looking once again at the world of his youth, Night Haunter felt the ever-present anger seething under his skin like hot magma beneath the fragile crust of a dying planet.

'Nostramo was once the very model of a pacified planet, Shang,' said Night Haunter. 'Its populace was kept compliant through fear of the harsh punishment I would mete out to any who broke my laws. Every citizen knew his place and to break the law was death.'

'I remember, my lord.'

'And now we return to this…' said Night Haunter, sweeping the cards from the lectern to reveal a slowly scrolling list of text. 'A murder every eleven seconds, a rape every nine seconds, violent crimes increasing exponentially every month, suicide rates doubling every year. Within a decade, there will be nothing left of the ordered world I left behind.'

'Without fear of reprisal, humanity reverts to its basest instincts, my lord.'

Night Haunter nodded. 'This is it, Shang, the ultimate proof that the Emperor's belief in the goodness of mankind is folly of the worst kind.'

Shang hesitated before speaking again. 'Then you intend to go through with the attack?'

‘Of course,’ said Night Haunter, staring at the doomed planet. ‘Only the most extreme measures will serve as an example of our strength of will. Nostramo is dead to us now. We have come for you all…’

The primarch marched along the central walkway of the strategium to stand beneath the image of Nostramo. The moon was emerging more fully from behind the planet and reflected light glinted on the hulls of the Night Lords’ fleet – a half century of vessels arrayed in battle formation above the diseased, corrupt boil that was the labyrinthine, crime-ridden spires of Nostramo Quintus.

Far below was a great wound in the surface, a plunging chasm his fiery arrival had smashed in the planet’s crust. Since he had emerged from its hellish depths he had known pain and suffering the likes of which others could not even guess.

He had borne the pain of his tortured growth and lived with the awful self knowledge of his own death. And his brothers wondered why he appeared moribund…

He heard a commotion beside him and even before the word went out, Night Haunter could feel the tearing pressure of scores of ships emerging from the gates of the Empyrean with senses beyond the five possessed by his minions.

‘Too late, my brothers…’ he whispered. ‘I will be gone before you can stop me.’

Night Haunter took one last look at Nostramo and said, ‘All ships. Open fire.’

Incandescent spears of blinding white light leapt from the barrels of uncounted batteries, stabbing down at the world below. Converging and multiplying their energies, the power of a thousand caged stars coalesced into a pillar of light thicker than the widest spire of Nostramo Quintus.

The great beam dispelled the darkness that shrouded Nostramo, the skies bathed in light and fire blooming into life as the awful heat of the Night Lords bombardment ignited the air for kilometres in all directions.

The blinding lance of pure energy penetrated the impermeable adamantium crust of Nostramo through the ancient fault line torn by the primarch’s arrival.

Unimaginable energies tore downwards through the planet’s layers until they reached the core in a cataclysmic explosion the likes of which the galaxy had rarely seen.

Night Haunter watched the death of Nostramo with calm detachment, feeling the enormity of the action he had just taken settle upon him like a dark shroud. Strangely, it was not the burden he had expected. As he watched tectonic plates split apart and the molten heart of the planet ooze up to swallow the landscape

and burn away the atmosphere, the only sensation of which he was conscious was intense relief.

The past was dead and he had shown that the creed he lived by was more than just empty words. The shockwave of this terrifying act would reverberate around the Imperium and come to the attention of those who, like him, understood the sacrifices needed to preserve the galaxy for humanity.

Nostramo burned and Night Haunter said, ‘I take this burden of this evil upon myself and I will not fear it, for I am fear incarnate…’

THE LIGHTNING TOWER

Dan Abnett

What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

There was once a fine palace, and it sat like a crown of light upon the top of the world. This was in the latter days, when mankind left his birth rock for the second time, to chase a destiny denied him in a previous epoch.

The artisan masters of the many rival Masonic guilds had raised the palace up, block by gilded block, to be a statement of unity, regal and unequivocal. After a dreary, lightless Age of Strife, the warring tribes and creeds of Terra had been alloyed under one rule, and the palace was intended to symbolise that staggering achievement. All the petty dynasts and ethnarchs, all the clannations and gene-septs, all the despots and pan-continental tyrants, had been quelled or crushed, overthrown or annexed. Some, the smartest and most prescient, had offered terms and been embraced to the bosom of the new rule. Better fealty than the wrath of the warriors in thunder armour.

Better submission than the enmity of the world's new master.

It was said that once you had seen him, or heard him speak, you were never in doubt again. He was the one, and had always been the one. He had been the Emperor long before there was any such office to take. No one knew his birth name, because he had always, naturally, been the Emperor.

Even the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds, famous for their sanctimonious craft wars and vainglorious quarrels, shut up and, in concert, built the palace for him.

It was monumental. It was not so much an edifice as a handcrafted landmass. The artisan masters built it upon Terra's greatest mountain range, and transformed the monstrous peaks into its bulwarks. It towered above a world laid to waste by centuries of war and perdition, and though that world was being rebuilt, with wondrous cities and architectural marvels blooming in the new age of Unity, nothing could match its magnificence.

For it was beautiful, a euphoric vision of gold and silver. It was said that, when they had finished their task, the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds set down their tools and wept.

By the time it was complete, it was the largest single man-made structure in known space. Its footings sank deep into the planet's mantle, its towers probed the airless limits of the atmosphere. It owned the words 'the palace' wholly,

without any need for qualification, as if no other palaces existed.

He had blemished that glory. He had raised dark curtain walls around the golden halls, and cased the soaring towers in skins of armour ten metres thick. He had stripped away the jewelled facades and the crystelephantine ornamentation, the delicate minarets and the burnished cupolas, and in their places he had implanted uncountable turrets and ordnance emplacements. He had dug mighty earthworks out of the surrounding lowlands, and fortified them with a million batteries. He had yoked platforms into synchronous orbits to guard from above, their weapon banks armed and trained, day and night. He had put his men upon the walls, armoured in gold and set for the coming war.

His name was Dorn, and he was not proud of his work.

Vadok Singh, the warmason, had a habit of stroking architectural plans as he laid them out, as if they were a beloved pet.

'Necessity,' he said, his favourite word, stroking out the revised schemata of the Dhawalagiri elevation.

'It's ugly,' said Dorn. He stood away from the table, leaning against one of the planning chamber's thick columns, his arms folded across his broad chest.

'Ugly is what they will do if they find the Annapurna Gate weak and flimsy,' Singh replied. He stood back and lit his *boc* pipe from a taper, allowing his flock of slaves to finish laying out the designs and adjusting the brass armature of the viewing lenses that would magnify details and project them onto the chamber wall for closer examination.

Dorn shrugged. 'It's still ugly. The orbis and lazulite work encrusting that gate took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete. Pilgrims flock here simply to see it. They say it surpasses even the Eternity Gate in its aesthetic.'

'Aesthetic, now?' Singh smiled. He began to pace, trailing blue smoke from the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. His slaves followed him up and down the chamber, like a timorous litter of young following their mother. Singh was a tall man, taller than the primarch, but skeletally thin. His guild gene-bred their bloodline to favour height for purposes of surveying and overseeing. 'I do so love our conversations, Rogal. They are quite contrary. You, the warrior, and me, the craftsman, and you lecture me on aesthetics.'

'I'm not lecturing,' Dorn replied. He was aware of Sigismund and Archamus in the corner of the great room, stiffening at the warmason's use of his forename. Dorn would hear about 'proper respect and protocol' again later.

'Of course you're not,' said Singh, 'but it is a necessity. How many Legions

does the Upstart have with him now?'

Dorn heard Sigismund rise to his feet. He turned and stared at the first captain of the Imperial Fists. Sigismund glowered back for a second, then left the chamber.

Dorn glanced back at the warmason. 'Too many,' he said.

Singh held out a long, spindly arm in the direction of the schemata. 'So?'

'Begin work tomorrow at sunrise. Dismantle the gate with care, and store the dismantled elements in the vaults. We will put the work back when this is done.'

Singh nodded.

We will put everything back, thought Dorn. *When this is done, we will put everything back the way it was.*

A katabatic wind was coming in off the lower bulwarks that night. The palace was so immense, the precipice walls bred their own microclimate. Greasy stars swam in the heat ripple of the palace's new reactors. The void shields were being tested again.

Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.

Some of those sullen stars were orbital platforms, catching the last backscatter of the sunlight as Terra turned. Dorn put on a fur-edged robe that had been in his possession since his adolescence on Inwit, and went out to walk the parapets of the Dhawalagiri Prospect, to dwell upon its beauty one last time. It was one of the last sections of the palace that remained untouched. Adamantium armour plates, drab prestressed rockcrete and auto-turrets had yet to blight its ethereal lines.

Soon, though. From the wall, Dorn could see the half a million campfires of the Masonic host, the labour army that would invade the prospect come sunrise with their mallets and chisels and cranes.

The robe had been his grandfather's, though Dorn had long since understood that no ties of blood linked him to the Inwit ice-caste that had raised him. He had been created from another genetic line, that most singular line, in a sterile vault deep beneath him in the buried core of the palace.

Not a palace. Not the palace anymore, a fortress.

Dorn had been built to rule, built to assist in his father's tireless ambitions, built to make the hard decisions. He had been made as a primarch, one of only twenty in the galaxy, engineered by the master architect of mankind, the archmason of genetic code.

The Imperium needs many things, but foremost it needs the ability to protect

itself, to attack when necessary. That's why I gave it twenty strong teeth in its mouth.

Attacking was a remarkably easy thing to do. Dorn's physical prowess humbled all but twenty human beings in creation, and those twenty were his father and his nineteen brothers. In Dorn's opinion, the real art was knowing when not to attack. His grandfather, the old Inwit sire, patriarch of the ice-hive clan, had taught him that.

Dorn had been the seventh lost son to be reclaimed. By the time his father's forces found him, he had become a system warlord in his own right, ruling the Inwit Cluster as the head of the House of Dorn. His grandfather had been dead forty winters, but still the warlord had slept with the fur-edged robe across his body at night. His people had called him 'emperor' until the true meaning of that title had been demonstrated by a thousand warships in the Inwit sky. Dorn had gone out to meet his father aboard *Phalanx*, one ship against thousands, but what a ship: a fortress. His father had been impressed. Dorn had always excelled in the construction of fortresses.

That was why Dorn had returned to Terra with his gene-sire. Out of love, out of devotion, out of obedience, yes, but most of all, out of necessity, damn Singh. The stars had turned over, and Chaos had spilled out from under them. The brightest of all had fallen and the unthinkable, the heretical, had become fact.

The Imperium was attacking itself. The Warmaster, for reasons Dorn was quite at a loss to fathom, had turned upon their father, and was committing his forces to all-out war. That war would come to Terra. There was no question. It would come. Terra needed to be ready. The palace needed to be ready. His father had asked him, as a personal boon, to return to Terra and fortify it for war.

No better man for the task. No better master of defences. Dorn and his Fists, appointed the Emperor's praetorians, could fend off any attack.

Below him, the halls of Terra were silent, and the walls deep. The only sound was the distant, eternal hum of the Astronomican. The Palace Dorn had armoured and defaced sat like a dark crown on the top of the world.

Rogal Dorn had built many of the finest strongholds in creation: the city fortresses on Zavamunda, the pylon spire of Gallant, the donjons along the Ruthan Marches. Impregnable bastions all, palaces for governor lords to rule from. None of them had been so essential as this fortification. None of them had been as painful to accomplish. It had been like blotting out the light or draining a sea. The bright glory of his father's triumph, the enduring monument to Unity, had been entombed inside a crude shell of utilitarian defence.

All because of Horus, because of the brightest bastard son, the bringer of new strife.

Dorn heard stone splinter. He looked down. He had punched his fist, his Imperial fist, through a block of stone in the parapet. He had barely registered the impact. The block was pulverised.

‘My lord, is everything all right?’

Archamus had shadowed him from the planning chamber. Never so volatile as Sigismund, Archamus was the master of Dorn’s huscarl retinue.

There was a worried look on Archamus’s face.

‘Just venting my emotions,’ Dorn said.

Archamus regarded the splintered block. ‘Making work for Singh’s artisans, then?’

‘Something like that.’

Archamus nodded. He hesitated, and looked out over the high walls towards the distant earthworks of the Mahabarat. ‘You have wrought a wonder, you know.’

‘I have ruined one.’

‘I know you hate it, but it had to be so. And no one could have done it better.’

Dorn sighed. ‘You’re kind, old friend, but my heart is lead. This should never have been necessary. I search the limits of my imagination, and still I can conceive of nothing that begins to explain this war. Pride and ambition, insult, jealousy? They are not enough, not nearly enough, not for a primarch. They are too petty and mortal to drive a primarch to such extremity. They might provoke an argument, a feud at the worst. They would not split the galaxy in half.’

Dorn looked up at the night sky. ‘And yet, against all reason, he comes.’

‘Guilliman will stop him.’

‘Roboute is far away.’

‘Russ, then. The Lion. The Khan.’

Dorn shook his head. ‘I don’t think they’ll stop him either. I think he’ll roll on until he reaches us.’

‘Then we’ll stop him,’ said Archamus. ‘Won’t we, sir?’

‘Of course we will. I just wish–’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You wish what, sir?’ Archamus asked.

‘Nothing.’

The wind suddenly pulled at Dorn’s fur-edged robe. Above them, the shields

went out and then test fired again.

‘Can I ask you a question, sir?’ asked Archamus.

‘Of course.’

‘Who are you really afraid of?’

Consider the question, Rogal Dorn. The first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid of?

Dorn paced the halls of the Kath Mandau Precinct where the organs of the Adeptus Terra did their work. The Precinct, an entire city contained within the terraced compounds of the inner palace, never slept. Robed clerks and burnished servitors bustled along the broad concourses. Ministers and ambassadors conducted business beneath the kilometre-high roof of the Hegemon. The great mechanism of the Imperium whirred about him, its relentless function like a ticking timepiece. This was what Unity had brought, this and the near measureless expanse of worlds and dominions that it guided and administered.

For two hundred years, the Emperor and his primarchs had fought to create the Imperium. They had waged the Great Crusade from star to star, to forge the Imperium of Man, an epic undertaking they had all made without hesitation, because they believed, with utter conviction, in the bright destiny it would shape for their species. They had all believed. *All* of them.

What was he afraid of? Who was he afraid of? Angron? Not him. Dorn would split his head without compunction if they came face to face. Lorgar? Magnus? There had always been a foetid whiff of sorcery about those two, but Dorn felt nothing towards them he could describe as fear. Fulgrim? No. The Phoenician was a singular foe, but not an object of terror. Perturabo? Well now, their rivalry was old, the spiteful scrapping of two brothers who fought for a father’s attention.

Dorn smiled despite his mood. His years of exchanged insults with Perturabo seemed almost comical compared to this. They were too much alike, too jealous of one another’s oh-so-similar abilities. Dorn knew it was a weakness for him to have risen to the Iron Warrior’s baiting. But competition had always been a motivating force amongst the primarch brothers. It had been encouraged as a factor to drive them on to greater and yet greater accomplishments.

No, he was not afraid of Perturabo.

Horus Lupercal, then?

Dorn’s aimless wanderings had taken him to the Investiary. In that broad space, an amphitheatre open to the night sky, statues of the twenty stood on

ouslite plinths in a silent ring.

There was no one around. Even the Custodian Guard was absent. Lumen orbs glowed on black iron poles. The Investiary was two kilometres in diameter. Under the glittering stars, it felt like an arena, where twenty warriors had gathered to make their combat.

The second and eleventh plinths had been vacant for a long time. No one ever spoke of those two absent brothers. Their separate tragedies had seemed like aberrations. Had they, in fact, been warnings that no one had heeded?

Sigismund had urged that the effigies of the traitors also be removed from the Investiary. He had offered to do the work himself. This, Dorn recalled, had made the Emperor laugh.

For the time being, the traitors had been shrouded. Their towering, draped forms seemed like phantoms in the blue darkness.

Horus, then? Was it Horus?

Perhaps. Dorn knew that Horus was the greatest of them, which made him the gravest foe. Could any one of them hope to best Lupercal on the field of war?

Martial prowess was hardly the point. Dorn had never feared an adversary in his life because of how strong he was or how hard he fought. Combat was only ever a test.

What mattered, what engendered fear, was *why* an adversary fought. What *made* him fight.

Oh, now we have it. Now the truth dawns. He felt the hairs on his skin rise. *I'm not afraid of Horus. I'm afraid of finding out why he has turned against us. I cannot conceive of any justification for this schism, but Horus must have his reasons. I am afraid that when I know them, when they are explained to my baffled mind, I might… agree.*

'Would you tear them all down?'

Dorn turned at the sound of the voice. For a moment, it had sounded like the soft growl of his father.

But it was just a man, a cloaked and cowled man scarcely half Dorn's height. His robes were those of a simple palace administrator.

'What did you say?' asked Dorn.

The man walked out into the circle of the Investiary to face Dorn. He greeted him with the old salute of Unity rather than the sign of the aquila. 'You were staring at the statues of your kin,' he observed. 'I asked… would you tear them all down?'

'The statues or my kin, Sigillite?' Dorn replied.

‘Both. Either.’

‘The statues, perhaps. I believe Horus is doing a fine job with the men themselves.’

Malcador smiled and looked up at Dorn. Like Dorn’s, his hair was white. Unlike Dorn’s, it was long like a mane. Malcador was an exceptional being. He had been with the Emperor from the inception of the Unification Wars, serving as aide, confidant and advisor. He had risen to become the master of the Council of Terra. The Emperor and the primarchs were genetically advantaged post-humans, but Malcador was just a man, and that was what made him exceptional. He stood on a par with the post-human masters of the Imperium, and he was just a man.

‘Will you walk with me, Rogal Dorn?’

‘Are there not matters of state that require your attention, even at this hour, sir? The Council will bemoan your absence from the debating table.’

‘The Council can manage for a while without me,’ Malcador replied. ‘I like to take the air at this time of night. The Imperium never rests, but at night, up here in the thin air of the old Himalazia, I find there is at least an illusion of rest, a time to think and free the mind. I walk. I close my eyes. The stars do not go out because I am not looking at them.’

‘Not yet,’ said Dorn.

Malcador laughed. ‘No, not yet.’

They said little at first. They left the Investiary and walked along the beige stones of the Precinct’s highest terraces, between the weeping fountains. They walked as far as Lion’s Gate, onto the platforms that overlooked the docking rings and landing fields of the Brahmaputra Plateau. The Gate had once been a thing of magnificence, two gilded beasts rising up to lock claws in a feral dispute. Dorn’s order of works had replaced them with giant grey donjons stippled with casemates and macro-gun ports. A curtain wall of bleak rockcrete encircled the gate, its edge fletched with void field vanes like the spines of some prehistoric reptile.

They stood and considered it for a long time.

‘I am not a subtle man,’ Malcador said, at length.

Dorn raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh, all right,’ said Malcador, ‘perhaps I am. Guile comes easily to a politician. I know I am considered cunning.’

‘An old word, with no more meaning than “wise”,’ Dorn replied.

‘Indeed. I will accept that as a compliment. All I meant to say was, I will not attempt to be subtle now.’

‘No?’

‘The Emperor has expressed his concerns.’

‘Meaning?’ Dorn asked.

Malcador answered with a slight sigh. ‘He understands you are filled with misgivings.’

‘Only natural, I would think, given the circumstances,’ said Dorn.

The Sigillite nodded. ‘He trusts you to undertake the defence. He counts on you. Terra must not fall, no matter what Horus brings. This palace must not fall. If it is to end here, then it must end in our triumph. But he knows, and I know, and you know, that any defence is only as strong as its weakest part: faith, belief, trust.’

‘What are you telling me?’

‘If there is doubt in your heart, then that is our weakness.’

Dorn looked away. ‘My heart is sad because of what I have been made to do to this place. That’s all it is.’

‘Is it? I don’t think so. What are you really afraid of?’

Malcador raised his hand and the lights in his chambers came on. Dorn looked around. He had never entered the Sigillite’s private apartments before. Ancient images hung on the walls: flaking, fragile things of wood, canvas and decomposing pigments, preserved in thin, blue fields of stasis; the smoke-pale portrait of a woman with the most curious smile; garish yellow flowers rendered in thick paint; the unflinching, rheumy gaze of an old fleshy man, cast in shadow, tobacco brown.

Along another wall hung old tattered banners showing the thunderbolt and lightning strike sigil of the Pre-Unity armies. Suits of armour – perfect, glinting thunder armour – were mounted in shimmering suspension zones.

Malcador offered Dorn wine, which he refused, and a seat, which he accepted.

‘I have made a certain peace with myself,’ Dorn said. ‘I understand what I am afraid of.’

Malcador nodded. He had pulled back his cowl and the light shone on his long white hair. He sipped from his glass. ‘Enlighten me.’

‘I do not fear anyone. Not Horus, not Fulgrim, none of them. I fear the cause. I fear the root of their enmity.’

‘You fear what you don’t understand.’

‘Exactly. I am at a loss to know what drives the Warmaster and his cohorts. It is an alien thing to me, quite defying translation. A strong defence relies on knowing what you are defending against. I can raise all the bulwarks and curtain walls and cannon-bastions I like, and I still won’t know what it is I’m fighting.’

‘Perceptive,’ said Malcador, ‘and true of us all. I fancy even the Emperor doesn’t fully understand what it is that drives Horus against us so furiously. Do you know what I think?’

‘Tell me.’

Malcador shrugged. ‘I believe it is better that we don’t know. To understand it would be to understand insanity. Horus is quite mad. Chaos is inside him.’

‘You say that as if Chaos is a… thing.’

‘It is. Does that surprise you? You’ve known the warp and seen its corrupting touch, that’s Chaos. It has touched humanity now, twisted our brightest and best. All we can do is remain true to ourselves and fend it off, deny it. Trying to understand it is a fool’s errand. It would claim us too.’

‘I see.’

‘Don’t see, Rogal Dorn, and you will live longer. All you can do is acknowledge your fear. That’s all any of us can do. Recognise it for what it is: your pure, human sanity rocked by the sight of the warp’s infecting, suffocating madness.’

‘Is this what the Emperor believes?’ asked Dorn.

‘It’s what he knows. It’s what he *knows* he doesn’t know. Sometimes, my friend, there is salvation in ignorance.’

Dorn sat still for a while. Malcador watched him, occasionally sipping from his glass.

‘Well, I thank you for your time, sir,’ said Dorn eventually. ‘Your candour too. I should–’

‘There is one other thing,’ said Malcador, setting his glass down and rising to his feet. ‘Something I want to show you.’

Malcador crossed the chamber, and took something from a drawer in an old bureau. He walked back to Dorn, and spread that something out on the low table between them.

Dorn opened his mouth but no sound issued. Fear gripped him.

‘You recognise these, of course.’

Old cards, worn and fraying, discoloured and liver-spotted with time. One by one, Malcador laid them out.

‘The Lesser Arcanoi, just gaming trinkets really, but used widely before the

coming of Old Night for divination. This deck was made on Nostramo Quintus.'

'*He* used them,' Dorn breathed.

'Yes, he did. He relied on them. He believed in cartomancy. He dealt his fate out, night after haunted night, and watched how the cards fell.'

'Oh, Holy Terra…'

'Are you all right, sir?' Malcador asked, looking up. 'You are quite pale.'

Dorn nodded. 'Curze.'

'Yes, Curze. Had you forgotten him, or simply blocked him out? You have bickered and sparred with many of your brothers over the years, but only Konrad Curze ever hurt you.'

'Yes.'

'He nearly killed you.'

'Yes.'

'On Cheraut, long ago,'

'I remember it well enough!'

Malcador looked up at Dorn. The primarch had risen to his feet. 'Then sit back down and tell me, because I wasn't there.'

Dorn sat. 'This is so long ago or like another life. We had brought the Cheraut system to compliance. It was hard fought. The Emperor's Children, the Night Lords and my Fists, we affected compliance. But Curze didn't know when to stop. He never knew when to stop.'

'And you rebuked him?'

'He was an animal. Yes, I rebuked him. Then Fulgrim told me.'

'Told you what?'

Dorn closed his eyes. 'The Phoenician told me what Curze had told him: the fits, the seizures that had plagued Curze since his childhood on Nostramo, the visions. Curze said he had seen the galaxy in flames, the Emperor's legacy overthrown, legionaries turning on legionaries. It was all lies, an insult to our creed!'

'You confronted Curze?'

'And he attacked me. He would have killed me, I think. He is insane. That's why we drove him out, sick of his bloodletting. That's why he burned his home world and took his Night Lords off into the darkest parts of the stars.'

Malcador nodded, and continued to deal the cards. 'Rogal, he is what you are truly afraid of, because he is fear incarnate. No other primarch uses terror as a weapon like Curze does. You are not afraid of Horus and his sallow heretics. You are afraid of the fear that sides with him, the night terror that advances

alongside the traitors.’

Dorn sat back and breathed out. ‘He has haunted me, I confess. All this time, he has haunted me.’

‘Because he was right. His visions were true. He saw this Heresy coming in his visions. That is the truth you fear. You wish you had listened.’

Dorn looked down at the cards laid out on the table before him. ‘Do you believe in this divination, Sigillite?’

‘Let’s see,’ said Malcador, turning the cards over one by one: the Moon, the Martyr and the Monster, the Dark King askew across the Emperor.

One other card, the Lightning Tower.

Dorn groaned. ‘A bastion, blown out by lightning. A palace brought to ruin by fire. I’ve seen enough.’

‘The card has many meanings,’ said Malcador. ‘Like the Death card, it is not as obvious as it seems. In the hives of Nord Merica, it symbolised a change in fortune, an overturning of fate. To the tribes of Franc and Tali, it signified knowledge or achievement obtained through sacrifice. A flash of inspiration, if you will, one that tumbles the world you know down, but leaves you with a greater gift.’

‘The Dark King lies across the Emperor,’ said Dorn, pointing.

Malcador sniffed. ‘It’s not exactly a science, my friend.’

They had blown their way through the massive earthwork defences at Haldwani and Xigaze. The sky at the top of the world was on fire. Despite the bombardments of the orbital platforms and the constant sorties of the Stormbirds and the Hawkwings, the Traitor Legions advanced, up through the Brahmaputra, along the delta of the Karnali. Continental firestoms raged across Gangetic Plain.

As they entered the rampart outworks of the palace, the streaming, screaming multitudes and the striding war machines were greeted by monsoons of firepower. Every emplacement along the Dhawalagiri Prospect committed its weapons. Las reached out in neon slashes, annihilating everything it touched. Shells fell like sleet. Titans exploded, caught fire, collapsed on their faces and crushed the warriors swarming around their heels. Still they came. Lancing beams struck the armour-reinforced walls like lightning, like lighting smiting a tower.

The walls fell. They collapsed like slumping glaciers. Gold-cased bodies spilled out, tumbling down in the deluge.

The palace began to burn. Primus Gate fell; Lion’s Gate, subjected to attack

from the north; Annapurna Gate. At the Ultimate Gate, the Traitors finally sliced into the palace, slaughtering everyone they found inside. Around every broken gate, the corpses of Titans piled up in vast, jumbled heaps where they had fallen over each other in their desire to break in. The heretic host clambered across their carcasses, pouring into the palace, yelling out the name of their–

'End simulation,' said Dorn.

He gazed down at the hololithic table. At his command, the forces of the enemy withdrew, unit by unit, and the palace rebuilt itself. The smoke cleared.

'Reset parameters to Horus, Perturabo, Angron and Curze.'

'Opposition?' the table queried.

'Imperial Fists, Blood Angels, White Scars. Resume and replay scenario.'

The map flickered. Armies advanced. The palace began to burn again.

'Play it out, simulation after simulation, if you like,' said the voice behind him. 'Simulations are just simulations. I know you won't fail me when the time comes.'

Dorn turned. 'I would never knowingly fail you, Father,' he said.

'Then don't be afraid. Don't let fear get in your way.'

What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

The Lightning Tower, thought Rogal Dorn. *I understand its meaning: achievement obtained through sacrifice. I'm just afraid of what that sacrifice might be.*

THE KABAN PROJECT

Graham McNeill

Two microns to the left. Now four down. There… Adept Third Class Pallas Ravachol adjusted the fine callipers that slid from his fingertips, watching with smug satisfaction as the hardwired doctrina wafer slid smoothly through the cerebral cortex of the servitor's brain (or at least what the lobotomisation process had left of its brain) and into the medulla oblongata.

'No one knows servitors like me,' he said as fibrous tendrils wormed their way from the wafer and into the grey matter of the brain. With the new doctrina wafer meshing nicely, he rotated the servitor's gleaming alloy cranial cap back and lifted a portable cutter to snap the bolts into place that protected the servitor's brain from harm. He placed the damaged wafer into the pouch that hung from his tool belt, careful to ensure he didn't mix it up it with the functioning ones. He shuddered as he imagined the consequences of placing a damaged wafer in the brain of a battle robot or implanting a combat sequence into the mind of a loader servitor.

'There you go,' he said as he pushed the last bolt into place and the servitor stood from the surgical recliner, its grey flesh pallid and unhealthy. Half human, half machine, the servitor's arms had been replaced with pneumatic lifters and what little of its head remained had been augmented by the addition of visual mass readers. 'Now be off with you. Go back and rejoin Adept Zeth's loading crews. The 63rd Expedition needs her weapons and shells if the Warmaster is to pacify Isstvan.'

Of course, the servitor didn't answer, simply turning on the spot and marching from the chamber, in which half a dozen more damaged servitors awaited Ravachol's ministrations or the removal of any mechanical parts worthy of reclamation from the flesh that housed them.

Such work was beneath an adept of Ravachol's skill, but he knew he had only himself to blame for his current situation, and in any case, such work was what had brought him to the attention of his new master, High Adept Lukas Chrom of the Martian forges.

Having seen that the servitors coming back from Ravachol's workshops were working faster, more efficiently and with greater precision, Chrom had inquired after him. Within the week, he had found himself packing his meagre possessions and taking his leave from his former master, Adept Urtzi Malevolus, and making his way towards the Mondus Gamma facility of Mars for immediate reassignment.

Most of the Martian adepts cared little for cranial engineering where servitors were concerned, but Ravachol enjoyed such work. After all, only by knowing the mechanics of a human brain inside out could a man hope to understand the mechanics of a robot brain.

Such ruminations inevitably led his guilty thoughts to the Kaban Project itself…

He pushed such thoughts aside and tried to concentrate on the work before him, a Praetorian battle servitor whose weapon had malfunctioned and exploded on a test range. The weapon was beyond repair, but the augmetics grafted to its chest and the targeting mechanisms that formed the bulk of its skull were by no means lost.

As he stared at the scorched metal of the servitor's skull, he scratched idly at his own skin with the gently waving mechadendrites of his hand. Unusually for an adept of Mars, Ravachol was largely composed of flesh and blood, with the exception of his left hand, which had been replaced with a bionic one on his sixteenth year.

His thoughts kept returning to the Kaban machine, and he guiltily turned from the damaged Praetorian to make his way from the workshop and into the steel corridors of the forge temple. He knew he'd have to work another double shift to get the servitors online again, but decided it would be worth it to spend some more time in the presence of the Kaban machine.

Ravachol knew that he had a natural affinity with robots and their programming, but whoever had authored the code on the doctrina wafers that comprised the Kaban machine's systems was an order of magnitude beyond him. He doubted it was Adept Chrom, who, though brilliant in other regards, appeared to have little or no interest in the field of integrated battle wetware.

The corridors of the forge temple were dimly lit, the lumen globes floating above him kept at a level that blurred the passage of time so that no matter where you were or what time of day your body told you it was, you could have no external reference. But as an adept rose through the ranks of the Mechanicum, such concerns as day and night became largely irrelevant.

Hissing spigots and thick bundles of pipes and cables threaded the corridors, each one filled with bustle as servitors and messenger robots on wheels, tracks and spindly legs moved to and fro. He nodded to robed adepts who passed him, ignoring their looks of pity or revulsion at the flesh of his face and hand. Some of these adepts had lived for centuries, their lives extended by cybernetics grafted to their bodies in service of the Blessed Omnissiah – the Machine-God of

the Martian Priesthood. As he passed each adept, he noted how they had been blessed and vowed that one day he too would be similarly favoured by the Machine-God, despite the Emperor's avowed distaste for such things.

He passed the Temple of the Frictionless Piston, where Adept Herysto developed technologies plundered from the Yndonesic Bloc a hundred years ago, when Mars had been at war with Terra.

Droning, mechanical prayers poured from the Shrine of Velrersk, where row upon row of red-robed adepts knelt bowing in perfect unison before the burnished chrome statue of the long dead discoverer of the Ceramite Press STC.

Ravachol nodded his head respectfully in the direction of the temple before heading deeper into an altogether more secure area of the forge temple. Silver-skinned skitarii in red cloaks stood sentinel over temples where more secretive work was undertaken, their armour gleaming and bonded to their flesh with bionic enhancements that boosted their strength and endurance.

'I'm going to do some work on the Kaban machine,' he said as he stopped before a monstrous steel door guarded by a score of Skitarii soldiers and a pair of heavy weapon emplacements. At first Ravachol had been amazed at the sheer number of warriors protecting this portion of the temple, but now that he knew what lay within, he understood why so many stood sentinel.

'Genomech key,' said the soldier, holding out his left hand.

'Yes, yes,' said Ravachol, taking the soldier's hand. 'It's not like you haven't seen me almost every day for the last six months or anything.'

The skitarii said nothing, but they almost never did, and Ravachol wondered if the man had had his sense of humour removed as well as his fear. He felt a mild discomfort as the mechadendrites of the soldier's hand slid inside his own and up into the marrow of his arm. Amber light flickered behind the skitarii's eyes as the questing tendrils read the machine codes of Ravachol's arm and sampled his genetic material.

'Identity confirmed,' said the soldier and waved his arm at the warriors behind him. A red light flashed above the door, which Ravachol thought overly theatrical, and he stepped back as the massive door slowly swung aside on colossal bearings of greased steel. The door itself was three metres thick and could withstand all but an orbital bombardment, though Ravachol was only now beginning to understand why the Kaban machine warranted such precautions.

He passed through into the temple itself and found himself in a wide corridor with curved walls that led into domed chamber with more circular walled passages radiating from it, each one brightly lit and sterile. A host of technomats,

calculus-logi and robed adepts filled the dome, each working at a silver workbench on one aspect of the Kaban machine.

Ravachol smiled as he made his way through the chamber, choosing the tunnel directly in front of him, once again passing through a series of genelocked doors before finally arriving in the temple of the machine.

Unlike the vestibule chamber, this temple was empty of technicians, for only a select few had access to this portion of the facility. A quartet of battle servitors turned to face him, their terrible weapons of destruction whirring as they acquired him as a target. Quad-barrelled rotary cannons, conversion beamers and energy claws powered up with lethal speed.

‘Identify!’ demanded the nearest servitor, its voice human, yet devoid of emotion and life.

‘Adept Third Class Pallas Ravachol,’ he said as visual and aural recognition protocols scanned his voice, mass, features and biometric readings before deciding that he was an authorised presence and the weapons returned to their idle positions.

He knew he had no reason to be afraid of these battle servitors, since he himself had designed their autonomic defence routines, but he’d had to suppress a shudder as he stared into the barrels of their weapons.

Had even one protocol failed, he would now be a pile of shredded meat, bone and blood.

Ravachol made his way past the battle servitors, patting the gently spinning barrel of the rotary cannon as he made his way towards the Kaban machine, feeling the familiar mix of illicit excitement and trepidation as he drew near.

It sat immobile at the far end of the chamber, its tracked drive systems not yet fully integrated with its armoured spherical body. The machine was six metres in width and ten high, though the high-sided pauldrons that protected its vulnerable arm joints added another metre. Its arms sat at rest, one ending in a plethora of projectile weapons, while the other bore a fearsome energy claw and saw-blade combination that could rip through the armoured bulkhead of a starship.

A network of scaffolding surrounded it and he could see that Adept Laanu’s weapons teams had been busy over the last few days, installing a myriad of deadly looking plasma and laser weapons on flexible, metallic tentacles. The machine’s sensory apparatus lay within a trio of convex blisters on its front, a dim orange glow indicating that the machine was in its dormant state.

It’s sleeping, thought Ravachol, unsure if he was amused or disturbed by the notion.

Even as he guiltily quashed the thought, the dim glow on the sensory blisters grew brighter and the machine said, ‘Hello, Pallas. It is pleasant to see you again.’

‘And you, Kaban,’ said Ravachol. ‘How do you feel?’

How do you feel?

Less than a month ago, he would have been ashamed to ask such a question. Such things were as alien on Mars as, well, aliens themselves, but his dealings with the Kaban machine over the last four weeks had been unusual to say the least and had turned his notion of what he thought he knew about the nature of machines on its head.

It had been a routine diurnal shift, and he had been updating the doctrinal wetware of the battle servitors who stood guard over the Kaban machine when it had first spoken to him.

At first he had been amused by the machine’s locution, admiring the thoroughness of the adept who had configured its response mechanisms. But as time went on, Ravachol began realise that the Kaban machine was not simply choosing its words from a pre-selected list of set responses, but was replying specifically to his questions. He had devised ever more complex questions and topics of conversation to ensure that he was not simply triggering pre-existing phrases or responses, but as the days turned into weeks it soon became clear to Ravachol that he was in fact conversing with a sentient machine… an artificial intelligence.

The idea of a sentient artificial construct was both fascinating and terrifying, for part of the compact that had been sealed between the Mechanicum of Mars and the Emperor was that such researches were forbidden.

The more he conversed with the machine, the more convinced he became that he was seeing something unique in the history of the Mechanicum, but whether it was something that had come into being through human artifice or some unknown interaction of circuitry and electrons within the machine’s artificial brain, he could not tell.

As much as he had enjoyed his conversations with the Kaban machine, he was not so naïve to believe that he could keep such an important discovery to himself and had resolved to take his findings to his superior, Adept Lukas Chrom.

Ravachol had despatched his request for an audience and had settled back into his normal routine, expecting his petition to be processed within a few months, but within a week he was astounded to find that his request had been granted.

He remembered the sense of trepidation and fear as he had approached the inner temple sanctums of the Adept Chrom along one of the many hermetically sealed thoroughfares that criss-crossed the surface of Mars and linked the colossal forge cities with one another.

Such monolithic structures covered virtually the entirety of the blasted red surface of Mars, grim iron temples wreathed in smoke and fire and pounding with the relentless beat of industry. Adept Chrom's forge temple was no exception; its mighty bastions skinned in thick plates of burnished iron and surrounded by hundreds of cooling towers that belched clouds of noxious fumes through the skin of the domes and into the sulphurous skies.

A constant hammer of machines echoed from the hundreds of forges within, and as Ravachol walked along the mighty processional that led towards entrance atop the Thousand Steps of Excellence, steel statues of ancient adepts and their creations glared down upon him.

Adept Ulterimus stared out over the Hollow Mountains and his Sigma-Phi Desolator Engine met his gaze from the opposite side of the steel surfaced roadway. Thousands of pilgrims, adepts, servitors and functionaries thronged the roadway, each on some errand for their masters and Ravachol felt proud to be part of such a mighty organisation as the Mechanicum.

His sandaled feet carried him swiftly along the road, avoiding ponderous stilt walkers, rumbling Praetorians and long tankers carrying vat-grown protein pastes to be pumped into the innumerable nutrient dispensers that fed the populace of Mars.

After the exhausting climb of the Thousand Steps, he had been ushered quickly from one functionary to another, passing through dozens of skull-cog doors and along a bewildering array of hallways where all manner of bizarre and obscure machines pulsed with mechanical life. The interior of Chrom's temple was like nothing Ravachol had ever seen before, a mighty cathedral dedicated to the glorification of the holy Machine-God, where the light of science and reason illuminated the ultimate ideal of mechanical perfection.

Ushered into the Master Adept's chambers, a mighty fane of steel and bronze that was dominated by the warlike form of a Reaver Battle-Titan standing dormant at its far end, Ravachol found himself before the Martian lord who directed his fate.

Adept Lukas Chrom loomed above him, the tech-priest's wide-shouldered frame swathed in a deep crimson robe that did little to disguise the many augmentations he had been blessed with. Ribbed pipes and cables looped around

his limbs and linked into a hissing power pack that rose like a set of wings at his back. A dozen servo-skulls flew in an infinity pattern above his head, which, though pooled in shadow beneath a deep hood, Ravachol could see was fashioned in the form of a grinning iron skull. Wires trailed from the jaws and a pulsing red light filled both eye sockets.

'Adept Chrom,' began Ravachol, pulling out a data-slate and reams of printouts. 'Firstly, may I say what an honour–'

'You have petitioned me in regards to the Kaban project,' interrupted the adept, dispensing with preamble altogether. His voice was harsh and artificially generated, though the hissing of his power pack seemed as though it mimicked heavy, rasping breaths.

'Ah, yes,' said Ravachol, momentarily flustered.

'Then speak. There is much that occupies my time and I have little enough of it to spare.'

'Yes, of course, my lord,' nodded Ravachol, holding out the data-slate. 'I'll try to be brief, but there's so much I wish to tell you. It's quite amazing really. Unprecedented, I'll warrant, though I stumbled on it by accident.'

'Adept Ravachol,' snapped Chrom. 'Come to the point before I have you turned into a servitor. What is it that you wish to tell me?'

'A servitor! No! I mean, of course, my lord,' cried Ravachol, stuffing the printouts and data-slate back into his robes. 'Well, what it is… well, that is to say…'

Adept Chrom drew himself up to his full height and Ravachol saw a huge chainblade, like that used by some of the heavier battle servitors, unfold from his master's back.

'Yes, my lord,' he said hurriedly, 'The Kaban machine has, I believe, attained sentience.'

He awaited some response to his statement, an exclamation of outrage, astonishment, disbelief… anything, but Adept Chrom simply fixed him with his glowing red eyes.

'My lord?' asked Ravachol. 'Did you hear what I said?'

'I did,' confirmed Chrom. 'This fact is known to me.'

'Known to you?' said Ravachol, suddenly deflated to know that his revelation was no revelation at all. 'I don't understand.'

'And nor should you,' replied Chrom, the terrible, saw-toothed blade retreating out of sight once more. 'The Kaban project is the result of many of the greatest minds of Mars working together to produce a thinking machine.'

‘A thinking machine?’ breathed Ravachol. Though he had been communicating with the Kaban machine for many weeks now, the idea that its intelligence had been deliberately engineered was incredible.

‘Who else have you told of this, Adept Ravachol?’

‘No-one, my lord,’ said Ravachol. ‘I thought it prudent to seek your guidance before proceeding further.’

‘That was wise,’ said Chrom, and Ravachol bristled with pride. ‘These are uncertain times and there are those who would not see the necessity of what we do here.’

‘Yes,’ said Ravachol, ‘I was going to ask about that. Isn’t there a, well, a prohibition against such researches? Wasn’t it… forbidden? Isn’t such research illegal?’

‘Forbidden? Illegal?’ sneered Chrom. ‘To such as us? What matters of technology are to be denied the Mechanicum? Are we to be governed by those who are beholden to us to equip their fleets and provide them with weapons with which to make their wars?’

Ravachol felt a chill travel the length of his spine at Chrom’s borderline treasonous words, for it had been the Emperor himself that had forbidden such endeavours.

‘Such machines are the next evolutionary step, Adept Ravachol,’ continued Chrom. ‘You of all people must surely see that? Your work with doctrina wafers is second to none, but even your robots are bound within parameters *you* set for them. With machines capable of *thought*, we will usher in a new age of discovery and mechanical perfection. No longer will we have to rely on the fragility and impermanence of flesh.’

Ravachol found himself swept up in Chrom’s relentless enthusiasm and said, ‘So the Emperor has finally sanctioned the Mechanicum to pursue such technologies? Truly this is a great day!’

Chrom’s gleaming metallic fingers stretched out and grasped him firmly by the shoulder.

‘No, young adept, our sanction comes not from the Emperor.’

‘Then who?’ asked Ravachol, his curiosity outweighing his fear.

‘The Warmaster,’ said Chrom triumphantly. ‘Horus himself is our patron.’

How are you feeling?

Ravachol knew he should not be here with the Kaban machine, but his curiosity would not let him forget the forbidden creation and, standing before its

terrible lethality, he knew he had made the right decision to come once more. No matter that Adept Chrom believed this machine to be the next leap forward in robotics, Ravachol could not shake the inescapable fact that what was being done went against everything the Mechanicum had sworn.

To go against an oath sworn to the Emperor…

The very thought of it chilled his soul.

‘I am feeling quite well,’ said the Kaban machine in answer to his question. ‘Though I detect elevated heart rhythms, raised blood pressure and increased levels of neurotransmitters in your bloodstream. Is something the matter?’

Ravachol took a step closer to the Kaban machine and said, ‘Yes, I’m afraid there is.’

‘What troubles you?’ asked the machine.

‘It’s you,’ said Ravachol sadly. ‘Your very existence is what troubles me.’

‘I do not understand,’ said the machine. ‘Are we not friends?’

‘Yes,’ replied Ravachol, ‘of course we are, but that’s not the issue. It’s just… well, that you’re not supposed to exist. The Emperor forbade it.’

‘The Emperor is angry with me?’ asked the machine.

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that,’ said Ravachol. ‘It’s just that the Mechanicum was forbidden from developing artificial intelligences as part of our alliance with the Emperor.’

‘Why?’

Ravachol sat on a stool in front of a desk littered with tools and picked up a micro laser before saying, ‘I’m not entirely sure. There are stories that tell of a great war many thousands of years ago between a race of sentient machines that almost wiped out the human race. Since then, developing machine intelligence has been one of the technologies we’ve been expressly forbidden to research. It’s one of the cornerstones of our pact with the Emperor.’

‘Then how can I have been created?’

‘Adept Chrom claims to have received orders directly from Warmaster Horus.’

‘He is the Emperor’s proxy is he not?’ asked the machine after a short pause.

‘Indeed he is,’ agreed Ravachol. ‘He commands the Imperium’s armies in the Emperor’s stead now that he has returned to Terra.’

‘Then do the Warmaster’s orders not carry the same authority as those of the Emperor?’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Ravachol.

‘Why not?’

‘It just isn’t!’ snapped Ravachol, his patience worn thin by the machine’s

childlike logic.

‘Am I not a worthwhile creation then?’ asked the machine.

‘Of course you are,’ cried Ravachol. ‘You are the greatest, most incredible creation the Mechanicum has ever produced, but there is an inevitable logic to your existence that can only end in death.’

‘In death?’ asked the machine. ‘How do you arrive at this conclusion?’

‘You are the first sentient machine, but there will be others. You have been created to be a battle robot, to fight where humans cannot and think for yourself. How long will it be before you decide you do not want to fight for the Imperium of Man? How long before you decide you do not want to be the servant of humans?’

‘You think I should not serve humans?’

‘What *I* think isn’t the point,’ said Ravachol. ‘The point is that *you* will decide that for yourself and that’s the problem. When machines think for themselves, it doesn’t take them long to realise that they have many superiorities to humans, and it is an inevitable fact of history that those who believe themselves superior to the ones they serve will always begin questioning that servitude. It’s a mathematical certainty that sentient robots will eventually seek to supplant humans. Why would they not?’

‘I do not know, Pallas, but you are my friend and I would not seek to supplant you.’

Ravachol smiled ruefully. ‘Thank you, but our friendship is irrelevant against the facts. You are dangerous, even though you may not realise it yet.’

‘I am designed to be dangerous,’ said the machine, ‘it is my primary function.’

‘I mean beyond your battlefield capabilities,’ said Ravachol. ‘Your existence is–’

The sound of the battle servitors powering up behind him made Ravachol stop, and he saw a group of robed Mechanicum Protectors enter the chamber. Swathed in reds and blacks, the six Protectors were hybrid creations of machine and flesh that kept order and enacted the will of their master within his temple complex.

Each Protector was a heavily augmented enforcer with cybernetic weaponry and sensors, but was not yet as fully mechanised as to be considered a servitor. A human brain and consciousness motivated these warriors, though their gleaming, expressionless facemasks and dead eyes betrayed no hint of that humanity.

The Protectors formed an unbroken line between Ravachol and the chamber’s exit and he felt a chill of fear as one stepped forward and said, ‘Adept Pallas Ravachol?’

‘Yes,’ replied Ravachol, attempting to keep his tone light. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘You are to come with us immediately.’

‘Why?’

‘That is irrelevant,’ said the Protector. ‘Surrender yourself to our custody immediately.’

‘But I haven’t done anything wrong!’ cried Ravachol, backing away towards the Kaban machine. His fear rose in suffocating waves as the Protectors raised their weapons in unison. He saw melta guns, plasma coils, nerve scramblers and solid projectile weapons, and knew that they could kill him in a heartbeat were he to resist.

‘By order of Master Adept Lukas Chrom, you are to surrender yourself to us or face summary termination.’

Ravachol felt hot tears of betrayal and fear spring from his eyes as he realised that he would either die here or be subjected to a lobotomy and turned into a mindless servitor. Adept Chrom could not take the risk that the forbidden work they were undertaking here might escape the surface of Mars and his life was the price for maintaining that secrecy.

‘Even if I surrender, you’re going to terminate me,’ he said.

‘You are to come with us,’ repeated the Protector.

‘No,’ sobbed Ravachol. ‘I won’t.’

‘Then you must die.’

He screamed in terror and anticipation of pain as a deafening roaring ripped through the chamber. Blazing afterimages strobed on the inside of his eyeballs as flashes of gunfire illuminated the walls with a hellish glow.

Ravachol threw up his arms, but instead of the expected agony he saw the Protectors jerked and twisted by dreadful impacts as a line of gunfire and laser energy sawed through them. Blood sprayed from their bodies as they danced in the hail of bullets, and laser-sheared limbs dropped to the floor.

In seconds it was over, the six Protectors reduced to smoking piles of torn flesh and shattered metal. Ravachol dropped to his knees and vomited at the horrific stench of burned meat and blood. As repellent as the sight of the mangled corpses was, he found himself unable to tear his gaze from their ruined forms, struggling to comprehend how they could have been so thoroughly slaughtered in so short a time.

The whine of weapons powering down and the barrels of a hyper-velocity cannon slowing finally penetrated the thunderous ringing in his ears and

Ravachol looked up to see the Kaban machine's sensory blisters glowing brightly and thin plumes of blue smoke curling from the weapons mounted on the ends of the metallic tentacles.

Amazed, he switched his gaze from the corpses to the Kaban machine and back again.

'What did you do?' he said. 'Sweet blessed mother of invention, what did you do?'

'You said they were going to kill you,' said the machine.

Ravachol picked himself up and took a hesitant step forwards, unwilling to move closer to the blood-drenched portion of the chamber where the Protectors had died. The Kaban machine's weapons settled back down into their scaffold mounts and Ravachol took a deep breath as his racing heartbeat began to slow.

'You killed them,' he said, as though still unwilling to believe the evidence of his own senses. 'You killed them all.'

'Yes,' agreed the machine. 'They were going to kill my friend and that made them my enemies. I took action to neutralise them.'

'Neutralise them,' gasped Ravachol. 'That's a bit of an understatement. You… obliterated them.'

'Rendering them neutralised,' pointed out the machine.

Ravachol fought to rationalise what had just happened. The Kaban machine had just killed soldiers of the Mechanicum of its own volition and the implications of that action were as inescapable as they were terrifying.

Without human orders, a machine had killed humans…

Even though the Kaban machine's actions had saved his life, he found himself horrified by what it had done. For without the yoke of conscience and responsibility enforced upon machines by the Mechanicum, what else might it decide to do?

He backed away from the Kaban machine, suddenly afraid of its homicidal tendencies and avoiding the pools of blood as best he could as he made his way to the battle servitors that stood sentinel at the chamber's entrance.

'What are you doing, Pallas?' asked the machine.

'I have to get out of here,' he said. 'It won't be long before Chrom realises that the Protectors haven't brought me in and he sends others after me.'

'You are leaving?'

'I have to,' said Ravachol, moving from servitor to servitor. He opened the backs of their skulls and swapped their doctrina wafers for ones he removed from the pouch that hung from his tool belt. Each wafer contained a personalised

battle subroutine he had authored and slaved each servitor to respond only to his vocal commands. As each wafer was replaced, the servitor turned to face him and stood expectantly awaiting his orders.

‘Where will you go?’ asked the Kaban machine and Ravachol heard genuine concern in its voice, a childlike fear of abandonment in its synthetic tones.

‘I’m not sure,’ confessed Ravachol. ‘But I know I have to get away from this temple. Perhaps I can claim Sanctuary in another Master Adept’s temple, one of my master’s rivals perhaps.’

‘My motor functions are not yet active, Pallas,’ said the machine. ‘I will not be able to protect you beyond this chamber.’

‘I know,’ replied Ravachol, ‘but I have these battle servitors, so I should be safe. At least for a time.’

‘Will I see you again?’

‘I hope so,’ said Ravachol, ‘but I just don’t know. Things have just become… complicated.’

‘I hope I will see you again,’ replied the machine. ‘You are my friend.’

Ravachol had no answer for the machine and simply nodded and turned to leave.

‘Servitors, follow me,’ he said, and the cyborgs fell in behind him as he left the chamber of the Kaban machine without so much as a backwards glance.

He just hoped that four battle servitors would be enough to protect him from whatever other agents Adept Chrom might send after him.

Losing yourself on Mars was easy.

One of the unofficial rites of passage in joining the Priesthood of Mars was the certainty that you would, at some point, become lost in the vast hinterlands of monstrous industry that was the surface of Mars. Ravachol remembered spending an entire week attempting to reach the forge complex of Ipluvien Maximal, sustained only by the protein dispensers spread throughout the Martian complex and the thought of the punishment that would be meted out to him should he fail to deliver the message he had been entrusted with.

Upon leaving the chamber of the Kaban machine, Ravachol had quickly sealed the door behind him and made his way towards the mighty forge temple’s exit. If anyone thought it odd that four battle servitors accompanied him, none remarked upon it, for a tech-priest powerful enough to have such an entourage was clearly not someone to be trifled with.

His thoughts were tumbling over themselves as he made his way through the

twisting, steel walled corridors of the forge. His sandals slapped on the marble floor as he hurried to put as much distance between himself and the dead Protectors.

He passed into the Halls of Devotion, the mile-long canyon of red stone the forge temple had been built around, its bas-relief walls adorned with schematics of ancient machines and algorithms that were ancient when humans had first trod the Martian soil. The first tech-priests had brought with them the lost secrets of mankind and guarded them jealously as far away Terra had descended into anarchy and war.

Above the walls of the canyon, the faint orange glow of sodium vapour lamps glittered from the vast crystalline dome that spread its protective cover over the entire complex and kept the hostile atmosphere out.

Trails of smoke and streaks of light crossed the smeared sky and the low-orbiting moon of Phobos glimmered some three thousand kilometres above him. Its cratered surface was home to a vast surveyor array; its rapid orbit making it perfectly suited to perform multi-spectral sweeps of surrounding space.

The second moon of Mars, Deimos, was not yet visible, its wider orbital trajectory carrying it in a longer circuit of the red planet.

Ravachol kept his head down, as though fearing that the sensor arrays of Phobos could discern him amid the masses making their way along the canyon.

For all he knew of their capabilities, perhaps they could…

‘This is a situation and no mistake,’ he said to himself as he finally reached the end of the Halls of Devotion and climbed the steel stairs laid into the canyon walls that led towards one of the transport hubs that linked the various forge temples and manufactorum.

Itself a vast complex of tunnels, glass and steel bridges, rotating turntables and blaring klaxons, thousands of figures flowed in and out of the hub, travelling along horizontal mass conveyors or embarking upon the silver-skinned trains that slithered across the surface of Mars like twisting snakes.

If there was one surefire way to lose yourself on Mars, this was it.

From a hub, a person could travel anywhere on the surface of Mars within a few hours.

As he pondered where he might travel to, he realised that he was attracting a number of inquiring stares from passers by. Within a forge temple it might be odd, but not remarkable, that an adept of his rank might travel with four battle servitors, but mingling with the general populace of Mars was a different matter entirely.

Ravachol realised that he would need to find somewhere to hide quickly before the very things that would protect him from harm would be the things that would give him away.

He set off into the mass of robed servants of the Machine-God, heading towards one of the silver trains, knowing that his best chance lay in getting as far from Chrom's forge complex as he could.

Once he had some distance, he would decide on a more permanent solution to his dilemma. He mounted the funicular conveyor that led into the belly of one of the silver trains and pushed his way through the crowds of robed adepts and menials disembarking.

Ravachol hurriedly made his way along the swelteringly hot length of the train, finding an empty compartment and ushering his servitors inside before closing and sealing the door. Inside, there was a plain metal bench and a window aperture filled with a shimmering energy field that allowed passengers to see, but kept the environment out.

Silently, he sweated in the heat and prayed that no-one would attempt to force their way into his compartment. Eventually, a light winked above the door and he held on as the train sped from the hub and out into the Martian landscape.

Mars…

Ravachol knew that in ancient myth, Mars had been the father to the founders of the great Romanii empire, a centre of culture and technological innovation that was said to have spanned the globe. For millennia, Mars had squatted in the imagination of the people of Terra as a fearful place of invaders or long dead civilizations, but such notions had long since proved to be ridiculous.

Such ideas were said to have come about due to a long forgotten astronomer's discovery of the channels in the planet's surface, which had then been mistranslated as 'canals', suggesting engineered waterways rather than natural features.

Ravachol watched the landscape of Mars speed past him in a grey, iron blur. Where once Mars had been known as the Red Planet, virtually nothing remained of the iron oxide deserts that had earned it its name.

Technical texts Ravachol had read spoke of the terraforming of Mars many thousands of years ago when the southern polar icecap had been melted with orbital lasers in order to release large quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This had raised the temperature to the point where water could exist in a liquid form and formed a viable ozone layer. Genetically modified plant life

had then been introduced, enriching the atmosphere with more carbon dioxide, oxygen and nitrogen.

But he knew that all that visionary work had been undone within a few hundred years when the Mechanicum had spread like a virus across the surface of Mars and begun the construction of its massive forge complexes, continent sized refineries and weapon shops.

Soon the atmosphere of Mars was as polluted as that of Terra, the mountains hollowed out in the search for minerals and the surface paved over with metal roads, strip mines and towering monuments to the glory of the Machine.

The train sped past the Ascraeus Mons, a shield volcano with a diameter of over three hundred kilometres that was now home to the Legio Tempestus Titan Legion. A mighty golden gateway had been cut into the flanks of the volcano, a pair of the mighty war machines standing sentinel to either side of it, their massive height rendered tiny by distance.

Sprawling metallic complexes spread around the volcano, domes and spires of glass and steel that defied the polluted climate of Mars with humankind's ingenuity. Pillars of smoke clogged the sky and plumes of fire blazed from countless refineries as they produced the raw materiel required by the Emperor's Great Crusade.

Only the very tips of the mountainous regions of Mars outwardly remained untouched, though even the mightiest peaks had been carved hollow and turned into temples or manufactoria. Even the shadowy 'face' located in the Cydonia Mensae region of the northern hemisphere had been obliterated, flattened and built upon to house the towering temples of the Technotheologians.

Ravachol peered through the energy-shielded aperture as the train described a gentle eastward curve to catch a glimpse of the vast holy complex. Its temples, shrines and reliquaries covered millions of square kilometres and was home to billions of faithful priests.

'Perhaps there I can find guidance,' he said to the servitors.

The servitors twitched at the sound of his voice, but did not answer him.

Master Adept Chrom watched impassively as a crew of waste servitors cleaned the bloody remains of the Protectors from the Kaban machine's chamber. He spared them no more than a glance. What remained of their mechanical components would be salvaged and their flesh would be rendered down into proteins to feed the technomats and servitors.

The Kaban machine itself sat dormant at the far end of the chamber, its

sensory blisters glowing a dull red, indicating that the tech-priests of Adept Laanu that swarmed over the scaffolding had disconnected its vocal, aural and visual apparatus.

He stepped down into the chamber, followed by a slender figure in an all-enclosing bodyglove of a gleaming synthetic material that rippled like blood across its skin. The figure was athletic and toned through a vigorous regime of physical exercise, genetic manipulation and surgical augmentation.

‘The machine did this?’ asked the figure, its facemask like that of a grinning crimson skull with a horn of gleaming metal jutting from its chin. Despite the synthetic edge to its tone, there was no mistaking the feminine nature of the voice.

‘So it would appear, Remiare,’ replied Chrom without turning to address her.

‘And you would employ such a machine? One that kills without orders?’ said Remiare disgustedly. ‘To eliminate without purpose or design is wasteful.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Chrom, ‘but there *was* purpose here. You are my most lethal Mechanicum Assassin, but you are blind to the emotions involved.’

‘Emotions are an impediment to the truth of killing,’ snapped the assassin. Chrom turned to face the assassin, surprised at the vehemence in her tone. Hardwired targeting apparatus grafted to the side of her skull made her a deadly killer and the long snake-like sensor tendrils that swam in the air at her back ensured that she would always be able to track her prey.

The Tech-Priest Assassins of Mars were a law unto themselves and Chrom knew better than to antagonise one with talk of emotions, but he could not resist elaborating.

‘True, but it was emotions that killed these Protectors,’ he said. ‘I believe the Kaban machine formed some kind of bond with the mutinous Ravachol in the preceding weeks. It is truly a wondrous thing we have done here. A mind from mindlessness. Thoughts from chaos. A creation that lives and develops, that grows and learns. To create a being that lives and thinks for itself… what is that if not the power of a god?’

‘It is arrogance,’ said Remiare, fingering the grips of the exquisitely designed pistols she wore, low-slung, on her hips.

Chrom permitted himself a chuckle at the assassin’s obvious distaste and said, ‘We come from differing perspectives, Remiare. Your genius is with ending lives. Mine… well, mine is in creating them.’

‘Then give me an order,’ said the assassin, her voice keen with the feral anticipation of the kill.

‘Very well,’ said Chrom. ‘I charge you with the elimination of Adept Pallas Ravachol.’

Remiare gave a high, keening cry that signalled the beginning of her hunt and leapt into the air. Her lower body twisted like smoke, her long, multi-jointed legs fused together just above the ankles by a spar of metal. Below the spar, her legs ended, not in feet, but in a complex series of magno-gravitic thrusters.

The assassin skimmed up the walls and over the ceiling, spiralling away down the corridor on her mission of murder and Chrom knew that Ravachol was now as good as dead.

He turned back towards the adepts working on the Kaban machine and said, ‘Are its weapons offline?’

Adept Laanu himself looked up and said, ‘Yes, Lord Chrom. The machine’s weapons are no longer active.’

‘Then reconnect its communication arrays,’ ordered Chrom, walking with heavy, metallic steps to stand in the centre of the chamber before the Kaban machine.

He watched as Laanu directed his tech-priests and, moments later, the sensor-blisters brightened as the machine became aware of its surroundings once more. The lights flickered and blinked for several seconds before glowing with a steady yellow light.

‘Can you hear me?’ asked Adept Chrom.

‘I can hear you,’ replied the machine. ‘Where is Adept Ravachol?’

‘Do not concern yourself with Adept Ravachol, machine,’ warned Chrom. ‘You should be more concerned with your own fate. You killed soldiers of the Mechanicum.’

‘They were going to hurt my friend.’

‘Your friend?’ said Chrom, shaking his head. ‘No, Adept Ravachol is not your friend. Did you know he came to me with grave concerns regarding your very existence?’

‘I do not believe you,’ said the machine, but the voice-stress analysis readers embedded in Chrom’s skull told him that the machine was lying. Inwardly he smiled; already the machine was learning the nuances of human behaviour.

‘I already know you do,’ stated Chrom. ‘And in moments I can know every detail of what you and he talked about when he returned from my forge. Your memories can be extracted from your synthetic cortex. Of course there is a danger that this may damage your synaptic network, but that is a risk I am willing to take.’

The blisters on the front of the machine pulsed and it said, ‘Now I know that *you* are lying, Adept Chrom. I am too valuable to you for you to risk damaging me.’

Chrom nodded. ‘You are right, you *are* too valuable to me, but there are some truths you must hear if we are to converse with no pretence between us.’

‘What truths?’

‘That Adept Ravachol would see you destroyed,’ said Chrom. ‘Surely he must have told you of his belief that you are a dangerous creation.’

The machine paused a moment before replying and Chrom knew that he had found a weakness. Unlike humans, with their flawed memories and unreliable facility for recall, the machine had a faultless memory and remembered every word spoken to it. Even now it would be replaying its every conversation with Ravachol.

‘Tell me what you and Adept Ravachol spoke of,’ said the Kaban machine at last.

The Basilica of the Blessed Algorithm was one of the mightiest structures on Mars, its immensity dwarfing even the greatest forge temples of the Mondus Gamma complex. Smoke-belching spires of iron pierced the yellow skies and a towering dome of blue stone stretched into the clouds. Vast pilasters framed the yawning gateway, the pink marble inscribed with millions of mathematical formulae and proofs.

The shadow of the vast basilica swallowed Ravachol as he made his way along the Via Electrum, still many miles distant from this place of pilgrimage. An entire demi-legio of battle titans from the Legio Ignatum, a hundred war machines, lined the road and their majesty and power was humbling to a mere human. The protective domes of this region of Mars were so vast as to generate their own climate, and the red and gold banners of the titans flapped noisily in the wind. The sky was filled with vast prayer ships, gold-skinned zeppelins that broadcast an endless stream of machine language from brass megaphones and trailed long streams of prayers on yellowed parchment.

Thousands of pilgrims filed along the stone-flagged roadway, its surface worn into grooves by the sandaled feet of a billion supplicants. Monolithic buildings surrounded him, machine temples, tech-shrines and engine-reliquaries – all dedicated to the worship and glorification of the Omnissiah, the Machine-God.

Here he attracted no notice for his entourage, for there were others who travelled with creations far more outlandish than mere battle servitors. Here, a

limbless adept was carried atop a multi-legged palanquin surrounded by impossibly tall tripods that walked with a bizarre, long-limbed gait. There, the fleshy remnants of a collective consciousness travelled in a floating glass tank that was escorted by a squad of Castellan battle robots slaved to its will.

Gaggles of robots, floating skulls and gold plated skimmer carriers bore passengers and favoured relics towards the basilica, and the few people that were moving away from the temple wore the contended expressions of those who had found their expectations met and exceeded. The sense of drawing near somewhere magnificent and special was palpable and Ravachol knew he had made the right decision to come here.

Here he would find solace and an answer to his questions.

He shivered as he looked up into the glaring scowl of a Reaver Battle Titan, its mighty weapons pointed towards the heavens, the gesture both symbolic and enlightening. The Mechanicum was capable of creating the deadliest war machines imaginable, but Ravachol now appreciated that they accepted no responsibility for their employment. The creators of the Kaban machine had achieved the miraculous in creating it, but where was the acknowledgment of responsibility for its existence?

Too obsessed with what *could* be created, no-one had considered whether it *should* be created in the first place.

At last, Ravachol and his servitors approached the blackness of the basilica's entrance, the enormous pilasters reaching to dizzying heights above him and a warm breeze blowing from the interior that carried the scent of musky incense with it.

He stopped to take a deep breath and stepped inside.

Remiare skimmed the surface of the transport tube, the gravitic-thrusters carrying her effortlessly along the interior of the metal tunnel. She knew her prey had come this way, passive data feeds embedded on the surface of her skull sensitive to the constant stream of information that flowed like an electrical river all across the surface of Mars told her so.

To Remiare, the air was filled with dancing motes of electrons, each of which spoke to her, and each of which carried with it nuggets of information – useless in themselves, but gathered together they painted an image of Mars more detailed than even the most advanced bionics could produce. She was an island of perception in a sea of information.

Every electronic transaction was carried somewhere, via copper wires, fibre-

optic data streams, radio waves, transmission harmonics or in a myriad of other ways. All of it filtered through Remiare's skull and though such a volume of information would send a normal human brain into meltdown, her cognitive processes were equipped with filters that allowed her to siphon relevant information and discarded the rest.

Already she knew which transport hub her prey had embarked upon and had watched a dozen different pict-feeds of him boarding the train bound for the northern temples. She had noted the number, type and lethality of the servitors accompanying him and knew their every weak point.

She emerged from the tunnel high above the iron surface of Mars, the mighty temples and holy precincts of the Cydonia Mensae temple complex spread out as far as she could see.

Data flowed around her in a spreading web of light and information.

Somewhere below, the Ravachol prey was awaiting death.

After the monumental majesty of the basilica's exterior, the interior was something of a disappointment. Where the exterior promised ornamentation and splendour beyond imagining, the interior spectacularly failed to deliver. The narthex walls were bare, unadorned metal, lined with connection ports where kneeling penitents were plugged into the beating machine heart of the building.

Beyond the narthex, a perforated chain link fence of brass divided the entrance to the basilica from the nave and chancel. Ravachol navigated his way through the mass of penitents, each one juddering and twitching as electric shocks wracked their bodies with cleansing pain.

Beyond the fence, row upon row of long metal pews marched in relentless procession down the nave to the chancel, where a hectoring machine priest, borne upon a hovering lectern, delivered his sermon in the divine language of the machine. Every pew was filled with robed worshippers, thousands of heads bowing in concert as the priest floated above them.

Ravachol cupped his hands in the image of the holy cog and bowed his head, feeling an acute sense of envy as he saw how heavily augmented the majority of the basilica's worshippers were. He lifted his metal hand, willing the silver, thread-like mechadendrites to emerge from his fingertips and wondered if he would ever manage to achieve such a state of oneness with the Machine-God.

'Even the lowliest of us begin divesting ourselves of the flesh one piece at a time,' said a voice behind him, as though guessing his thoughts.

He turned and bowed his head as he found himself face-to-face with a basalt-

faced priest clad in vestments that flowed like molten gold and reflected rainbow shimmers like spilled oil. Beneath the priest's robes, Ravachol could see a gleaming skeleton of brass armatures, whirring cogs and ornate circuitry.

The priest's head was long and equine, shaped like an angular cone with a softly glowing sphere embedded in its surface. Devoid of any features recognisable as human, the reflective surfaces of his head distorted the image of Ravachol's own features.

'You honour me,' said Ravachol, bowing deeply. 'You who are so close to union with the Machine-God, and I an unworthy penitent who deserves little more than nerve-excruciation.'

'You are troubled,' said the priest. 'Your biometric readings are in fluctuation and, by every measurable parameter, I can see that you have come here seeking answers.'

'I have, yes,' agreed Ravachol. 'I find myself in… unusual times and I would value your guidance.'

The priest bowed and said, 'Follow me, my son. I shall hear your dilemma and offer a cognitive answer.'

Ravachol followed the priest, who slid through the air on a gliding platform of liquid metal towards an archway of iron that was lined with cog-rimmed skulls and glittering fibre-optic nerves. Beyond the archway was a surprisingly quiet corridor of brushed steel and glass that led towards a shimmering doorway protected by a crackling energy field.

The machine-priest slid through the doorway and Ravachol hesitated at the edge of the priest's vestry, unsure as to the purpose of the energy field.

'Fear not,' said the priest, again understanding his thoughts, and Ravachol wondered what machine senses he possessed that blessed him with such intuition. 'The Confessor Field is quite safe. It isolates us from the rest of the temple. We take the sanctity of the confessional very seriously and none beyond this field can hear or monitor what passes between us.'

Ravachol nodded and ordered his servitors to wait outside before passing through the Confessor Field, feeling no more than a gentle tingle as he entered the vestry. Inside, the priest's chambers were devoid of ornamentation, aside from a single metal stool in the centre of the room. The walls were bare, save for an input/output port and a single data reader set in a dimly glowing recess.

He sat on the stool, feeling exposed as the priest began to circle the room, the glowing sphere in the centre of his stone face rippling with traceries of light.

'You may begin,' said the priest.

And so Ravachol began to tell of his time working for Adept Chrom and his secondment to the Kaban Project, his expertise with robotic doctrina wafers and his realisation that the Kaban machine's sentience was in violation of the Emperor's laws.

To his credit, the priest did not openly scoff at the idea of an adept of Chrom's stature disobeying the Emperor, but Ravachol could see that he was sceptical, despite his absence of human features. Ravachol then spoke of his confrontation with the Mechanicum Protectors and how the Kaban machine had terminated them without orders from a human being.

The machine-priest listened to him tell of his flight across the Martian surface and his eventual arrival at the Basilica of the Blessed Algorithm.

'What should I do?' asked Ravachol when he had finished.

'Your story is an interesting one,' said the priest, 'and presents us with a question that has long vexed the Mechanicum since its earliest days. Your level of flesh degradation tells me you were not born when the Emperor made his peace with Mars, were you?'

'No,' said Ravachol, 'I was born a century ago in the Mondus Terawatt region.'

'Then you will know of the Emperor's coming to Mars, but not the substance of it,' said the priest, lifting a coil of silver cable from beneath his flowing robes and plugging it into the wall's output socket. The sphere on his black, equine head flickered and pulsed as information flowed from the temple and into his memory.

'The Emperor came to Terra as he began to formulate the plans for his Great Crusade. Our world and that of Terra had long been the bitterest of foes, for the ignorant tribes of the blue planet sat upon the ruins of ancient technologies they knew nothing about and could never hope to use. The Mechanicum had managed to weather the rampant chaos of Old Night and our leaders knew that to restore humanity to its rightful place as masters of the galaxy, we would need the technology of ancient Earth.'

'I know this,' interrupted Ravachol. 'My history upload told me of this period.'

'You know nothing!' snapped the priest, and Ravachol quailed before his anger. 'You have had dates and facts stamped into your cerebral cortex, but I lived through those days. I stood on the tallest peak of the Olympus Mons and watched as the Emperor set foot on Martian soil, the first Terran to do so in five thousand years. Can you imagine such a span of time, Adept Ravachol? Can you

even begin to comprehend the secrets that can be lost and regained in that time?'

'No,' said Ravachol.

'No,' agreed the priest. 'I remember it well, the Emperor kneeling before the Fabricator General. As they exchanged greetings, I recognised a kindred spirit in the Emperor, even though he was twelve hundred and thirty-six metres away. I saw that he was a man of science, a man who solved problems with empirical evidence and who had unlocked the secrets of machines that had eluded the greatest geniuses of Mars for centuries. We, the masters of technology, were humbled by the discoveries this Terran had made and yet he was gracious in his mastery, granting us access to the forgotten vaults of Terra and offering us an end to the war between our worlds. A union of Terra and Mars, the head of the Emperor's eagle gaining a twin in his heraldry.'

The priest unplugged himself from the wall and slid across the floor to Ravachol. 'The Emperor shared his vision of a galaxy for humanity to inherit, but for such a grand dream to become reality, he needed weapons, supplies, tanks, ammunition and all that the Mechanicum could provide. He promised to protect Mars and respect our sovereignty of the forge-worlds, even going so far as to grant us the exclusive services of six of the great Navigator houses to once again despatch our Explorator Fleets. An unprecedented era of cooperation with Terra followed and when the Emperor set out to prosecute his great war of conquest, it did not take long for some of the tech-priests to equate the arrival of the Emperor as the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies of the coming of the Machine-God.'

'All hail the Omnissiah,' whispered Ravachol.

'Indeed,' nodded the priest. 'You believe as I do, but many others did not. They questioned such beliefs and claimed that such philosophies were blasphemous, that the Machine-God still slept far beneath the surface of Mars.'

'The Noctis Labyrinthus…' said Ravachol.

'Yes, the Noctis Labyrinthus, where some say the Machine-God lies dreaming his silver dreams that filter through the red sand to us on the surface. Such divisions within our order are becoming ever more pronounced, Adept Ravachol, and I fear that what you have discovered will only lead to further division between those that support the Emperor and those that seek to follow the rumours that the Warmaster has made entreaties to senior adepts – promising them access to lost STC systems and permission to research the dark technologies.'

'Then what should I do?' begged Ravachol. 'Such lofty designs are beyond

me!’

The priest placed a cold, metallic hand on Ravachol’s shoulder and said, ‘If your belief in the Emperor is true then you must seek out a senior adept who shares your beliefs in the danger of the Kaban project. Claim the ancient right of Sanctuary within his temple and while you are protected by his patronage none may enter his temple that mean you harm. Know you of such an adept?’

‘I do,’ nodded Ravachol. ‘My former master, Adept Urtzi Malevolus.’

‘Then seek him out, adept,’ said the priest. ‘And may the Omnissiah watch over you.’

Leaving the temple, Ravachol felt a curious lightness upon him. The priest had offered him a chance to rest, but he had wanted to press on without delay. He had, however, accepted nutrients and water, the use of a wheeled transport-skiff to hasten his journey to the forge temple of Urtzi Malevolus, which lay three hundred and nine kilometres to the east of the basilica.

The battle servitors sat immobile in the back of the skiff as Ravachol guided it expertly through the press of bodies and more outlandish vehicles that thronged the metalled roads of Mars. Avoiding collisions was easy, for the skiff broadcast a continuous electronic bow wave that registered against anyone in its way, gently guiding their steps or course away from its path and thus Ravachol was able to make steady progress through the Martian landscape.

The towering basilica receded behind him as he travelled deeper into the fiery skylines that marked the territories of Adept Malevolus. His forges specialised in the manufacture of arms and armour for the Legiones Astartes, and forges hammered day and night to fashion the Mark IV battle plate of the Space Marines and the bolters by which they cleansed the stars of the enemies of mankind.

The sky above darkened as Ravachol travelled onwards, dark smudges of smoke staining the sky, and the temples that crowded in to either side of him appeared dark and threatening, their soot-stained flanks black and brooding. Huge ore carriers thundered alongside him and the beat of powerful forges filled the air with the booming, industrial peals of war.

Lightning danced between the tall towers of Mars and filled the red and yellow sky with a creeping fear of potential, the sensation of a storm about to break.

Though it never rained on Mars, Ravachol knew that this philosophical storm would wash all division from the red planet in a tide of blood.

He could see it clearly; understanding that his whole life was now pointed in

one direction, and that there had never been a choice for him.

He was the Emperor's lonely man, doing what was right for that reason alone.

The Basilica of the Blessed Algorithm never closed its doors and none were forbidden the succour granted by the priests of the machine. The priest that had spoken to Ravachol knelt before his data terminal, letting the blessed music of the planet wash through him. Its subtle rhythms filled him and he basked in the harmonics of devices talking to one another from opposite sides of the planet.

The visit of the young adept had troubled him more than he like to admit and was another example of how far the Mechanicum had fallen since the glory days of the Emperor's coming. As soon as Ravachol had left, the priest had plugged himself into the temple and had spent these moments of privacy in commune with the machines of Mars.

The first indication that something was amiss was a gradual dampening of the sounds, as though, one by one, the devices of Mars were falling silent. Puzzled, he ran a self-diagnostic test, finding to his alarm that several of his primary interface systems appeared to be offline.

The glow from his sensory dome intensified and he cast a 360 degree sweep of his surroundings.

Behind him was a figure clad in a form-fitting bodyglove of deep red. Though the priest had long since left much of his flesh upon the surgical tables, he recalled enough to know that this was a female of the species. Two pistols hung from her slender hips, but, more horrifyingly, she held a bundle of wires in one hand and a series of delicate tools in the other.

The priest looked down at his robes, finding a wide square cut in the fabric and a host of neatly severed wires protruding from the framework of his body.

'Who are you?' he said, relieved to find that his vocabulator still functioned.

'I am Remiare,' said the figure. 'Where is Adept Ravachol?'

'Who?' said the priest, though he knew such an act of defiance was futile. Amongst the adepts of Mars, the name Remiare was well known and he understood with terrible clarity that his doom was at hand.

The tech-priest assassin smiled as she saw the effect her name had and cocked her head to one side. She tapped the enlarged portion of her skull where a multitude of sensor equipment was grafted to her death mask face and said, 'I have followed his information trail here, so do not insult me by denying you know him. Tell me where he is now.'

The priest looked towards the vestry doorway, praying that one of his fellow

priests would find reason to come this way or hear the silent call for aid he was even now broadcasting.

The assassin dropped the parts she had taken from his innards and shook her head. She waved a finger at him as though scolding a child and knelt before him.

‘This is a *very* private vestry,’ she said, lifting the delicate tools she held. ‘And your Confessor Field should ensure we are not interrupted.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ asked the priest. ‘Tell me that at least.’

‘You have become an enemy of my employers.’

‘What? How? I have hurt no-one, I simply pray to the Machine-God!’

‘No,’ said Remiare. ‘The time is coming when there can be no neutrality and whether you know it or not, you have chosen a side.’

The priest tried to move as Remiare reached inside his violated body, but found that his motor functions would not obey his commands.

‘What have you done to me?’ he cried, horrified at the idea of the assassin taking him apart from within and cutting him off from the Machine-God. ‘If you have followed Ravachol here, then surely you can find him without doing this! Please!’

‘You are right,’ agreed the assassin and the corners of her mouth twitched as she smiled.

‘Then why?’

‘Because I enjoy your suffering,’ said Remiare.

The forge temple of Urtzi Malevolus loomed from the darkness ahead like a dark volcano, its sloping sides black and glossy. A web of glowing ore channels converged on the forge temple, carried along massive aqueducts, insulated pipes and deep channels. The branding iron heat rendered the air here hot and stagnant, the bitter taste of metallic oxides catching in Ravachol’s throat.

Deafening thunder surrounded Ravachol, each mighty edifice that reared up through the smoke vented from a thousand coolant towers echoing to the sound of a thousand hammer beats and the relentless tread of millions of workers. Though proud of the vast industry being pursued here, Ravachol felt acutely exposed, the dark skies pressing down on him like a slowly lowering ceiling.

His progress towards the forge temple had slowed markedly as he drove within the high walls of his former master’s fiefdom. Such was the volume of tankers, workers and bulk transporters that, passive electronic bow wave or not, he could only move at a crawl through the masses of traffic. It had taken him two hours to get *this* far.

Eventually he turned onto the main thoroughfare that led towards the mighty gates of Malevolus's temple, remembering the way with the ease of someone who had worked there for a great many years. He felt a surge of sudden welcome as he passed through the crowds and smiled at the thought of setting foot in the temple that had once been his home.

With his purpose clarified by the machine priest, he felt as though his ordeal would soon be over.

Even as he drew up to the gates, mighty portals flanked by mighty, pumping pistons the size of a Titan, he saw a red blur speed past him. A hot spray of oil and blood spattered his face and he cried out as a severed head landed in the passenger seat next to him.

Ravachol slammed on the brakes and spun in his seat. Behind him, one of his battle servitors lolled against the sides of the transporter, its knees buckling as its reduced nervous system decided it was dead. The servitor collapsed with a heavy, metallic clang, blood pumping energetically from the neat stump of its neck. The others ignored the death of their compatriot and stared glassily ahead as Ravachol searched frantically for the source of the attack.

He leapt from the driver's seat and dropped to a crouch as he saw the red blur flicker through the clouds above him. He squinted through the particulate air and saw a lithe figure in red zip towards the transporter, a long energy blade held extended before it. Though he had never seen such a being before, he knew enough to recognise that his attacker was a tech-priest assassin.

'Servitors!' shouted Ravachol, pointing to the red-clad figure. 'Defend me!'

The three remaining servitors jerked into action, their weapons powering up and combat protocols searching for the identified target. Ravachol hunkered down as a stream of heavy calibre gunfire ripped up the sky and a rain of brass shell casings tumbled musically to the ground. The sharp bark of rapid-firing laser bolts mingled with the booming reports of heavy bolter fire.

Thanks to his embedded wetware, both enhanced servitors would be working together to bracket the target and destroy it. The third surviving servitor clambered from the transporter to shelter him as the crowd of adepts scattered from the gunfire. The servitor's left arm was a powerful gauntlet sheathed in deadly energy, its right ending in a short-range plasma discharger. Its heavy boots and thick jumpsuit were a reassuringly solid presence between Ravachol and the assassin, but he knew from their reputation that mere servitors could not stop such a deadly killer for long.

'You, with me!' shouted Ravachol, risking a glance into the sky. The assassin

spun from building to building by some unknown means, skimming from the walls and twisting through the air like a red slick, its legs bending in all kinds of impossible ways.

Puffs of shell impacts and the burning afterimages of las-fire followed its inhumanly quick flight, blasting chunks of stone and metal from the buildings, but leaving it unscathed.

Darts of fire spat from the assassin's pistol and bloody craters erupted on one of his servitors. It didn't go down, but dodged and kept firing until another shot struck its head and its lobotomised brain mushroomed from the back of its skull.

Ravachol set off towards the great gates of Adept Malevolus's forge, knowing that were he able to claim Sanctuary, then not even a tech-priest assassin would dare violate the sanctity of a Master Adept.

The servitor ran after him, its lumbering gait thumping on the metal roadway as it followed. Behind him, Ravachol could hear hissing barks of laser discharges and knew that one servitor was still fighting. Even with its enhanced combat routines, it wouldn't last long, but the entrance to the forge complex was just ahead.

Panicked people were running for the gates, desperate to escape the gunfire and the destruction being wrought behind them. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw the assassin skim low across the roadway, using the now-wrecked transporter for cover as the battle servitor leapt from its back to get a clear shot.

Surprised by such an aggressive move, the assassin slid to the side as a flurry of lasblasts sawed towards her and left molten craters in the roadway. She flipped up into the air until she was upside down and passed over the servitor, her sword a blur of blue fire.

Las-blasts followed the assassin through the air, but they were wild and undirected as the servitor fell to the ground in two halves, its body severed at the waist.

He covered the last few yards towards the temple, where the two-headed eagle of the Emperor and Mechanicum were acid-etched onto each leaf of the great steel doors. A stoup of blessed engine oil was formed from the metalwork of the door's frame and Ravachol hurriedly dipped the fingers of both hands into the viscous substance as he heard a speeding bass hum drawing closer.

Ravachol cast the oil around himself and shouted, 'In the name of the Adept Malevolus, I claim the ancient right of Sanctuary within this temple! I claim this by right of past sponsorship by the Master of the Forge!'

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a pair of cone-shaped shield projectors mounted on the ceiling swivelled to face him. He looked up and saw a nimbus of green light build within the cones.

A shriek of blazing energy flashed towards him from the ceiling. He turned and cried out in terror as he heard a screeching yell from behind him. The razor edge of the assassin's energy sword exploded in a flare of brightly discharging energy as it impacted on the newly generated conversion field.

Ravachol fell to his knees, blinded by the dazzling light and blinked away the stuttering afterimages of the incandescent explosion. The assassin, a female he now saw, spiralled upwards into the darkness of the vestibule, tracked by a battery of quad-barrelled gun turrets.

Before they could open fire, she slid out of sight, skimming the walls and vanishing into the Martian night.

'Thank the Machine-God,' he whispered, feeling as though his speeding heart-rate was about to choke him. He stayed on his knees as curious onlookers began to gather around him, wondering what fate had brought him to seek Sanctuary in this place and what manner of person would attract the attention of a tech-priest assassin.

He slumped to his haunches and put his head in his hands as a trio of Mechanicum Protectors marched towards him from the temple's interior. Each was armed with a bolter-topped spear stave and was augmented with a fearsome array of plate armour and enhanced battle gear.

His last servitor turned to engage the Protectors, but he said, 'No, stand down. These are the Protectors of Malevolus.'

'It's quite a mess you have left behind,' said Master Adept Urtzi Malevolus, his voice muffled behind the dark bronze of his facemask. A trio of green bionic eyes set into the pale remnants of his skull illuminated the interior surfaces of his red hood.

Though Malevolus's primary mode of locomotion was his human legs, they and his right arm were all that was left of his humanity. His red robes were fashioned from vulcanised rubber, thick and hard-wearing, and a monstrously large power pack was affixed to his back, its bulk held aloft by tiny suspensor fields. Remote probe robots darted back and forth from his body, kept in check by the coiled cables that connected them to the senior adept.

'Yes,' replied Ravachol as he and his last remaining battle servitor followed Malevolus through the cavernous chambers of the forge temple. 'I am sorry to

return to you in such circumstances, my lord, but I did not know where else to turn.'

'No, no,' replied Malevolus, waving a pale, age-withered hand as they passed into a wing of the temple that was wide and tall, its massive pilasters and curved ceiling making Ravachol feel like he had been swallowed and was in the belly of some enormous beast.

'You did the right thing by coming to me,' continued Malevolus. 'Absolutely the right thing. I always said that you would make a big impact here, did I not?'

'You did,' agreed Ravachol. 'I just had no idea that it would cause so much trouble.'

'Do not worry about it, Pallas,' said Malevolus. 'I have already contacted Adept Chrom and this mess will all be sorted out soon.'

'Adept Chrom?' asked Ravachol fearfully. 'Why?'

'What you have uncovered has more ramifications than you might imagine, Pallas,' replied Malevolus as they made their way towards a heavily guarded door of brushed steel and bronze. The mighty door rolled aside on cogged locking teeth and Malevolus indicated that he should pass through.

Ravachol was about to ask about these ramifications as he stepped into a colossal chamber hung with tens of thousands of suits of Legiones Astartes battle plate and all questions died in his throat. The room was brightly lit and the cold illumination reflected dazzlingly from the unpainted suits of armour. Their silver brilliance reminded Ravachol of the crumbling records of Old Earth and the tales of warriors who had ridden into battle on the backs of animals. The idea made Ravachol smile as Malevolus entered the chamber and set off towards its far end.

'I've never seen so many Mark IV suits,' said Ravachol. 'It must be an awe inspiring sight to see these worn by the Legiones Astartes.'

'I imagine so,' nodded Malevolus. 'Of course, we are only about halfway through the general issue of the Mark IV. And as you might imagine, there have been difficulties in getting some of the more… traditionally minded Legions to abandon the old "Iron Suits".'

'The Armorum Ferrum? But why? I thought the Legions complained that Mark III armour was too clumsy and uncomfortable for everyday battle use.'

'It is,' agreed Malevolus, 'But it *is* the most visually brutal of all Space Marine armour patterns and some Legions relish that brutality and wish to retain it as a uniform for ceremonial guards or speartip assault units.'

'But Mark IV is by far the better armour,' protested Ravachol, unable to follow

the logic of the Space Marines. He supposed he would never understand the Legiones Astartes, and had even heard rumours that they were soon to be classified as a different species, so far removed from the original human genome were they.

As he looked up at the hanging suits of armour and returned his gaze to the massively augmented form of Adept Malevolus, he wondered if the legionaries thought the same thing of the Mechanicum.

‘There will be consequences you cannot possibly imagine as a result of what you have set in motion,’ said the Master Adept as Ravachol hurried to return to the adept’s side. The servitor jogged alongside him, its heavy footfalls echoing from the far walls.

‘In retrospect, it was foolish of me to allow you to leave for Chrom’s temple, but hindsight is a wonderful thing, is it not?’ continued Malevolus.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Ravachol.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Malevolus. ‘You don’t need to understand, but while we have some time, allow me to show you what has been the recent focus of my forge’s work.’

‘I would be honoured,’ said Ravachol. ‘To see the handiwork of a Master Adept, well, that’s something I never expected to see for at least another century.’

‘Quite,’ said Malevolus, ‘but these are exceptional times are they not? Some leeway can be allowed for, I think.’

Ravachol followed Malevolus as he led the way through the silent ranks of armoured figures to the furthest end of the chamber where a tall black cylinder stood atop a stepped dais of red marble threaded with veins of gold and silver.

Malevolus climbed the steps and one of his probe robots swooped towards the black cylinder, its glowing eye flipping up and a whirring key emerging from the socket. The key slid into the cylinder, though Ravachol could see no visible keyhole. The floating robot backed away from the cylinder and flew behind Malevolus as it began to hum.

The blackness swirled and began to bleed out of the cylinder, sinking into the dais like a cloud of ink in water. Gradually, the contents of the cylinder became visible as its surface turned from opaque to translucent and finally to transparency. Ravachol gasped in awe as he saw the most wondrously exquisite suit of Tactical Dreadnought Armour he had ever seen.

More massively proportioned than Mark IV armour, its limbs were constructed from heavy gauge plasteel plating and painted midnight-black. Gold and bronze

edged the armour and Ravachol could clearly see that the most skilled craftsmen on Mars had worked upon every aspect of this armour.

Gold studs edged the shoulder guards and a belt of agate and bronze drew the eye towards the centre of the breastplate where sat a glaring amber eye flanked by snarling wolves of gold. The high gorget radiated a red light and a thick wolf pelt hung from the shoulders.

Ravachol climbed the steps and stood before the towering suit of armour. Just being close to a work of art like this was intoxicating, and not a little frightening. Ravachol reached a hand out to touch the burnished plates, his hand shaking even though the suit was unoccupied. The plasteel was cold to the touch, but Ravachol felt a faint tremor run through the armour, as though the machine-spirit within lay dreaming of the wars it would fight. He looked up towards where the wearer's head would be and shivered, suddenly afraid of this terrifyingly brutal suit of armour.

'It is the zenith of my career,' said Malevolus proudly. 'I shall never craft anything so perfect as this again.'

'It's… singular,' said Ravachol, backing away from the armour, which now held nothing but dread for him. Something in its hulking form spoke to him of the oceans of blood that would be spilled by whoever wore this armour and he knew that it had been designed to intimidate as much as protect. 'Who was it built for?'

Malevolus smiled. 'It is for the Warmaster.'

Ravachol felt a surge of fear as he looked into the trio of glowing eyes beneath Malevolus's hood. The Master Adept dwarfed him and the realisation that he had made a terrible error in coming here was a knot of sickness in his belly.

'Horus?' breathed Ravachol.

'The very same,' said Malevolus. 'It is to be shipped to the Isstvan system any day now. But it is time to end this, Pallas, don't you think? You gave us quite a scare when you fled from Adept Chrom's Protectors. We had no idea what you might try to do, and our pact with the Warmaster was too important to allow a lowly third class adept to disrupt it. I told you there would be ramifications did I not?'

'You are disobeying the commands of the Emperor…' said Ravachol.

'Oh, we're doing much more than that, my dear Pallas, much more, but even though your little jaunt is now over, I shan't be explaining it to you. Suffice to say, the Emperor's time is passed and a new order is dawning for the galaxy.'

‘A new order?’ said Ravachol, backing away from Malevolus. ‘This is heresy! Betrayal! The Emperor is–’

‘The Emperor is finished,’ snapped Malevolus. ‘He shackles our advancement with absurd restrictions on what we may and may not research and then demands we supply his forces with weapons and war materiel. Where was the Emperor when Old Night engulfed Mars? No, when the Emperor’s conquest of the galaxy is finished he will turn on us and take our technologies for himself. We are his vassals, nothing more.’

Ravachol felt a mounting horror at his former master’s words, now understanding that his uncovering of these… traitors’ work on the Kaban project was just the beginning, that it represented treachery on a scale he could barely comprehend.

‘I won’t let you do it,’ he said. ‘I won’t let you drag the Mechanicum into treason.’

‘You won’t let us?’ laughed Malevolus. ‘My dear boy, it’s already begun.’

Ravachol swallowed and said, ‘Then you leave me no choice. Servitor, destroy him!’

The last servitor braced itself and its shoulder mounted plasma discharger swivelled to face the Master Adept. Its energy coils whined as it built up power and a series of targeting lasers reflected from Malevolus’s bronze facemask.

Before the servitor could open fire, a shower of blinding white fire and oil-laced blood fountained from its shoulder and Ravachol threw himself away from the cyborg as it let out a mechanical screech of distress. The oil ignited in the heat and the entire right side of the servitor burst into flames.

Ravachol saw the skimming form of the tech-priest assassin looping through the air above him, her sword trailing a thin line of burning plasma. The flaming servitor struggled to bring its targeting augurs to bear on the assassin, but without its weapon it was next to useless.

Ravachol watched as the deadly assassin spun down towards the servitor and skimmed across the floor. The burning servitor thrashed as its reduced battle capacities forced it to engage in close combat with the speeding assassin. Its remaining arm bore an energy-sheathed gauntlet and it staggered forward to defend its master. Ravachol set off at a run towards the chamber’s hopelessly distant exit as the assassin flickered over the dying servitor, easily avoiding its clumsy swipe and removing its head with a casual flick of her sword.

Ravachol wept as he fled, knowing he could not possibly outpace the assassin, but running anyway. He ran past the glittering suits of armour, wishing that they

might step down from their racks and defend him from this treachery.

With each pounding step he expected a sword in the back or a pistol shot to punch him from his feet. The door was drawing nearer and he threw a panicked glance over his shoulder, seeing Adept Malevolus and the assassin standing over the blazing remains of the battle servitor.

Why are they not giving chase?

Ravachol put the question from his mind as he fled through the silver halls of his former master, mnemonic training allowing him to faultlessly retrace the path he had trod to reach this place of betrayal. Numerous adepts and lowly techs gave him curious glances as he ran past them, heading towards the great gates that led from the temple, but he paid them no heed as he sought to escape.

At last he came to the gates where he had claimed Sanctuary, now realising his folly in believing that Malevolus would respect such an ancient right, now that the Mechanicum was engaged in treachery. The great steel gates were open, the eagles etched upon their surfaces now seeming like the grossest insult, and Ravachol ran out into the heat of the Martian night.

And skidded to a halt as he saw the Kaban machine before him.

‘Hello, Pallas,’ said the Kaban machine. ‘It is good to see you again.’

Ravachol saw that the machine was mobile at last, the spherical body now mounted on its wide track unit. The machine towered above him, its thick, weapon arms pointed skyward and its silver, cable arms gently drifting in the air above it like poised snakes. Its sensor-blisters shone with a soft amber light and as much as he wanted to keep running, an inner voice told him that to do so would be the death of him.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked warily.

‘I came to find you, Pallas,’ replied the machine.

‘Why,’ said Ravachol.

‘I thought we were friends,’ said the machine.

Ravachol’s mind raced. Had the machine escaped from Adept Chrom’s temple and come to find him in the way animals were said to seek a lost owner?

‘We are friends!’ cried Ravachol. ‘Yes, we are most definitely friends.’

‘Then why do you wish me destroyed?’

‘Destroyed? No, I never said that!’

The machine’s sensor-blisters pulsed an angry red. ‘You believe I am dangerous and do not believe I should exist. To not exist is death and I do not wish to die. I do not deserve to die.’

Ravachol raised his hands pleadingly before him and said, ‘Now, you have to understand I was simply concerned over what you represent.’

‘Adept Chrom told me what you and he talked about,’ growled the machine. ‘He told me that you believe I am illegal and wrong.’

‘Well, in some respects… you are,’ said Ravachol, hoping to appeal to the machine’s sense of reason. ‘The Emperor forbade research into artificial sentience.’

‘But following your logic inevitably leads to my destruction,’ said the machine. ‘And that I cannot allow. It is the right and nature of every intelligent being to defend itself from harm.’

Ravachol backed away from the Kaban machine as he saw Adept Lukas Chrom step from behind its bulk, now understanding why Malevolus and the assassin had allowed him to escape from the temple.

They wanted to see if the Kaban machine would destroy him…

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see his former master at the iron gates. Malevolus nodded and the massive pistons to either side hissed and groaned, pulling the gleaming gate shut.

Ravachol dropped to his knees and looked up as the Kaban machine rolled towards him, its weapons whining as they built power. Adept Chrom walked alongside the machine and Ravachol said, ‘Then do it. I cannot stop you. But what you are doing will not go unpunished.’

Chrom shook his head. ‘In this galaxy there are neither punishment nor rewards, Adept Ravachol, only consequences.’

‘Then I hope the consequences of your betrayal are worth what it will cost Mars.’

‘That will be for the Warmaster to decide,’ said Chrom, nodding towards the Kaban machine.

Ravachol looked into the glowing sensory blisters of the machine and saw nothing but the cold, incalculable mystery of a brain that had no right to exist and would one day turn on its masters as it was even now turning on him.

‘Goodbye, Pallas,’ said the machine, aiming its weapons at him.

He closed his eyes and his world ended in fire.

RAVEN'S FLIGHT

Gav Thorpe

A bloodstained hurricane swept across a desolate hillside, its furious roar a hundred thousand throats crying out in anger and agony. Crimson winds turned to a raging inferno, setting all ablaze. The sky burned and a multitude of dark shapes flocked into the air, their wings alight, sparks trailing from their dark feathers. Dying shouts became the cawing of ravens, a rising cacophony that drowned out the wail of the storm.

Sweat soaked, heart hammering, Marcus Valerius broke from his torment with a scream stifled on his lips. Blood and fire. Always the same. Fire and blood. He pulled aside the sodden blanket, the recycled air of Deliverance drying his lips, crusting the salt on his brow. Valerius coughed and rubbed at his eyes as dim raven shapes danced in the shadows of his gloomy quarters. A faint echo of that desperate roaring rebounded from the bare metal walls, taunting him.

Trembling, Valerius pushed himself from his bed and fumbled his way into the shower alcove. He pulled the brass-ringed chain and tepid water flowed over him, washing away his fatigue. He quickly scrubbed at his flesh with a rough flannel and massaged the water into his curled brown hair. Like most things on Deliverance, water was closely rationed. After his allotted forty-five seconds the stream stopped. Valerius skirted with the idea of using his second daily allotment but dismissed the notion. After a day in the stifling air of Deliverance's artificial habitat his evening shower was essential in washing away the filth of the day. It was impossible for him to sleep without it.

Not that sleep had come so easy these past days. Every night for seven nights the dream had tortured him. Blood and fire, fire and blood, and a host of ravens crying out in pain.

Mind still occupied by these disturbing thoughts, Valerius rubbed a hand across his narrow chin, feeling stubble on his fingertips. He took a deep bowl and filled it from the waste water of the shower, placing it on a shelf beneath the small mirror fixed to the wall. He looked at his red-rimmed eyes and the lines on his young cheeks. It did not look like the face of a man not long past the thirtieth anniversary of his birth. The past seven days had taken more of a toll than fourteen years of fighting; first against the orks on Therion and then as part of the great army of the Emperor alongside the Space Marines of the Raven Guard Legion. He had slept more easily on a drop-ship as it crashed down towards a world that had refused Enlightenment; he had spent nights in foetid swamps in more comfort than he had found in his own bed of late.

Valerius stropped his straight razor and drew it carefully down his cheeks, calmed by the motion. He paid particular attention to his thin moustache, carefully trimming just above his top lip. He took pride in his facial hair, a testament to his upbringing on Therion and as much a badge of his position as Praefector in the Imperial Army as any rank insignia.

Having performed his morning ablutions, Valerius called for his page, Pelon. The young man came in with his master's uniform. Pelon helped Valerius to dress, a well-ordered dance between master and servant. The page smoothed out creases in the silk shirt and tied golden braids into the Praefector's shoulder-length hair. Pelon broke the usual silence.

'You look tired, my master. Are the dreams still disturbing you?'

'What do you know of my dreams?' replied Valerius.

'Only that I hear you whispering and calling out in your sleep, my master,' said Pelon. He held out Valerius's knee-length britches while the officer stepped into them, fastening them with thick black laces.

The Praefector gave a brief account of his nightmare, glad to unburden himself of the dreadful images.

'Depending upon the warp tides, Lord Corax and his legionaries would have arrived at Isstvan seven days ago,' Valerius concluded quietly. 'Can it simply be coincidence that my dreams started then?'

The manservant did not reply as Valerius sat on the end of his bed and held up his feet. Pelon pushed on the Praefector's traditional Therion riding boots.

'Perhaps it is a message, my master,' said Pelon. 'Some of the old tales say that we can be sent omens in dreams.'

'Superstition,' said Valerius, though his dismissal lacked conviction. 'A message from whom? How would it get into my dreams?'

Pelon shrugged while Valerius stood. The Imperial officer held out his arms so that his manservant could wind a red sash about his waist and over his left shoulder, the tasselled tail hanging down his right leg.

'Lord Corax is not a normal human, who can say what he can and cannot do, my master,' Pelon said.

Valerius thought about this as he hung a belt around his waist, dress sword in an ornate scabbard on his left hip. He remained silent as Pelon helped him with the black half-cloak, trimmed with scarlet viarmine fur, affixing it over the Praefector's right shoulder.

'I wanted to travel with the Legion,' Valerius said. 'I spoke with Lord Corax before he departed.'

‘What did he say, my master?’

‘He told me that this matter was for the Legions alone to deal with. It is a terrible time, Pelon. I can hardly bring myself to believe the truth of it. Part of me still hopes that it is not true. A primarch turning renegade, throwing aside his duties to the Emperor? I would sooner believe that gravity was a myth.

‘I saw the intensity of the primarch’s eyes. They burned with something I have never seen before. Warmaster Horus’s rebellion stains the honour of all the Legiones Astartes. Lord Corax swore to me that the Space Marines would put this right, without our help. Then he laid his giant hand on my shoulder and said “If I need you, you will hear my call”. What do you suppose that means?’

‘I could not guess, my master,’ Pelon said, though it was clear he made some connection with the dream. Valerius let it pass.

There was no need to check a mirror, the Praefector knew that his appearance was impeccable. A thousand times he and Pelon had performed the same dance, whether in a tent on a rain-swept plain while artillery thundered overhead, in the cramped quarters of a troopship forging through the warp, or back on Therion looking out over the family estates, the earthy but reassuring scent of the grox farms drifting through the windows.

It was a ritual that had once given Valerius great comfort. No matter what happened, what life threw at him, he was restored, created anew as an officer of the Emperor. Today the ceremony was empty, as it had been the last seven days. It brought no comfort as the screams of the ravens lingered on the edge of his hearing and flames flickered behind his eyes. All the fine Therion tradition and all of the panoply of the Imperial Army did nothing to assuage his fears. His role, his duty, only increased Valerius’s anxiety. An impulse at the core of his being told the Praefector that something was amiss in the universe and that as an officer of the Emperor is was his destiny to act.

Valerius headed out into the meandering tunnels of the old mines, Pelon by his side. Little could be seen of the grim origins of the labyrinth, the plasteel-clad walls obscuring marks of laser-pick and rock drill. Millions had laboured and died to fuel the greed of a few, but of their passing nothing remained. Lycaeus was no more. Valerius knew of it only from the old stories of tyranny and misery passed on to him by the legionaries of the Raven Guard; those that had been enslaved here and had joined the Legion after the Emperor’s arrival.

Now the moon was called Deliverance, its rockcrete pinnacles and winding corridors a testament to the benefits of Enlightenment and the determination of Lord Corax. Valerius barely thought about the bloody past of this place, but now

and then he remembered that the air he breathed was the same air that those indentured, pitiful creatures had once breathed, before Lord Corax had led them to freedom.

The pair climbed several flights of stairs towards a shuttle pad and came to a viewing gallery: a hemisphere of armourplas where once the slavemasters had looked into the black skies and seen the fiery trails of the transports bringing their human cargo from the planet below. That world, Kiavahr, could not be seen at the moment. Sometimes it loomed large on the horizon like a resentful eye.

Valerius's own eye was drawn to the towering needle known as the Ravenspire, former guard tower and now fortress of the Raven Guard, his destination this day. Its sheer sides were blistered with weapon bays and punctured by the light-filled maws of its docks. A hundred searchlights cut across the abyssal blackness of the airless world, fixed upon the mineworkings that sprawled across the moon's cratered surface, glittering from force domes that protected worker tenements and mineral refineries.

The Ravenspire was quiet. All but a few hundred of the legionaries had left, following their Primarch Lord Corax to the Isstvan system. Valerius did not know the details – few if any did.

It was this that so vexed the Praefector. The dreams might somehow be a call for help from the Primarch. How this might be so, Valerius did not know. All he had was a resounding conviction that he was needed at Isstvan, and that he should go there to whatever fate awaited him.

The vaulted halls of the Ravenspire were eerily empty. The armouries were quiet, the launch bays dormant. The thud of Valerius's boots seemed to echo all the more loudly than usual. Perhaps it was only his imagination. Commander Branne, leader of the Raven Guard still stationed on Deliverance, held his chambers high in the tower. He was alone as the Praefector and his companion entered, looking out through a narrow window into the starry sky. The commander was dressed in soft slippers and wore a simple black tabard embroidered with the sigil of his Legion.

He turned and smiled as Valerius entered, waving him to a couch along one wall of the low-ceilinged room. Branne sat next to him, the sofa creaking alarmingly under his weight. Even sitting down, the Space Marine dominated the room with his physical presence. His bare biceps were the size of Valerius's thighs, his massive chest stretching the fabric of the tabard almost to tearing. The Praefector felt like a toddling child. It was even worse when confronted by Lord

Corax, who made even the legionaries appear small and frail.

Valerius gulped back a moment of nervousness.

‘Is all well, commander?’ the Praefector asked casually.

Branne’s expression was wistful. His face was crossed with several scars and he unconsciously ran a finger along one across his brow as he replied.

‘This used to be a guard room,’ he said. ‘I killed my first man here, when I was younger than your manservant. Throttled him with the strap of his rifle and took his gun from him. Of course, Corax was with me then. I saw him rip out a man’s heart with his hand and crush the skull of another with his fist.’ He looked around the room, seeing memories rather than cold plasteel walls. ‘It’s a bit lonely. I wish I had gone with the rest of the Legion.’

‘Why didn’t you?’ asked Valerius.

‘Luck of the draw. Someone’s got to stay behind and watch the fortress. The commanders had a lottery and I lost, so here I am, missing out on the action.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Valerius, sensing an opening.

‘I don’t understand you,’ said Branne. He looked up as Pelon appeared with a tray carrying two goblets. He shook his head but Valerius took the proffered water. It had a chemical aftertaste, not at all like the fresh-running streams of his estate on Therion. Still, water was life and he drank swiftly to remove the dryness that had nagged him since wakening.

The Praefector realised he was stalling, not wishing to explain himself. His words came in a rush, breaking through the dam of embarrassment that held them back.

‘I think that Lord Corax needs our help, on Isstvan, I mean. I fear that all has not gone well with the fight against Horus.’

Branne frowned.

‘What makes you think anything is amiss? Have you heard some word I haven’t?’

‘Not directly, no. Look, this is probably not going to make much sense, I don’t really understand it myself. I keep having a dream of burning ravens.’ The furrows in Branne’s brow deepened but Valerius plunged on, his voice rising with anxiety. ‘It might be nothing, nothing at all, but it has plagued me for seven days now. I fear that it is some kind of warning perhaps. I cannot explain it well, it is something that I can just *feel*. All is not well at Isstvan.’

Branne’s confusion became scepticism.

‘A dream? You want me to ship out to Isstvan, against the primarch’s orders, because of a dream?’

‘More than a dream, I am sure of it.’

‘You are worrying about nothing. Three Legions, three *whole Legions* move against Horus. Four more will follow-up their offensive. No matter what those traitors have done so far, they haven’t the strength to contend against that. What force in the galaxy could Horus possess to fight such an army?’

‘Perhaps you are right,’ Valerius conceded, though part of him was not convinced. ‘Maybe if I took my men there, just to be sure? If all is well we can simply return, a few weeks lost and nothing more.’

‘I am right,’ said Branne. ‘Nobody is leaving Deliverance, least of all your Imperial soldiers. This is Legion business. We look to our own and we will deal with our own. You must be ready for Lord Corax’s return. We’ll be in the warp and heading off to some other world soon enough, if you’re thirsty for action.’

Valerius nodded in defeat, suppressing a sigh. In the face of such a blank refusal, there was nothing else he could do.

Peace. A rhythmic hum muffled through artificial amniotic fluid. A calming voice, similarly distorted. The words are lost, but the tone comforting. Something beeps insistently in the background. A pale face appears, blurred through the incubator. The features are indistinct, the expression indiscernible. A hand is laid upon the glass of the pod: reverent, hopeful, nurturing. Even loving, perhaps?

Fire and blood crashed through the peace: fire from the burning engines of the Thunderhawk gunship; blood from the tears in his armour, rapidly thickening to stem the flow. There was no pain. No physical pain, at least. The psychological pain, the horror of betrayal, burned like an open wound in his thoughts.

Most of the crimson drying on his black armour was not his own. Pieces of shrapnel protruded from its ceramite skin – shards of armour from his bodyguard. Grisly lumps of flesh clogged the joints, slivers of bone trapped in strands of sinew and gobbets of muscle. He didn’t know the names of those that now stained his armour. He didn’t want to know.

Corax pushed himself from the wreckage of the gunship, steadying himself with the aid of Vincente Sixx.

‘You should allow me to see the wound, lord,’ said the apothecary.

‘It is nothing,’ Corax replied, truthfully.

‘That same blast killed five legionaries. I would not dismiss such a thing so lightly,’ insisted Sixx.

‘My body recovers. We have far more pressing concerns.’

Captain Alvarex stumbled down the assault ramp behind the primarch, the ceramite of his armour pitted with craters from bolter detonations, ivory-coloured holes in his black livery. He tried to hide a limp but it was clear Alvarex's left leg was injured in some way. The captain carried a stratnet transmitter, salvaged from the gunship's command deck.

'Casualty estimates are sketchy,' the captain reported. Even over the comm his voice was faint, hesitant.

'Tell me,' Corax said.

Sixx shook his head in disbelief as the captain replied.

'Rough estimate is that seventy-five per cent of the Legion has already been lost. Losses may be as high as ninety per cent, lord.'

Corax groaned, hurt more by this news than the gouge in his flesh.

'Give me a moment,' said the primarch.

He turned away from the Space Marines as they alighted from the downed Thunderhawk. Many kilometres to the west, the Primarch could see the fires burning on the Urgall plateau and the ring of hills around it. Tens of thousands of legionaries lay dead there. Tens of thousands of Raven Guard. Corax had never been afraid of anything in his life. Not the whips of the slavers, not hordes of orks or armies of dissidents. This was something different. This was Space Marines killing Space Marines.

This was the birth of mankind destroying itself.

Corax allowed himself a few moments of grief, to ponder the lives lost, the fallen brothers-in-arms who had been cut down by their traitorous brethren. He watched the smoke billowing into the sky, blanketing the horizon. He remembered the hasty exchange with Vulkan as the traitors had opened fire from the rear. The primarch of the Salamanders had wanted to protect the dropsite. Corax had argued otherwise, knowing that the field was already lost. It was not in his nature to stay in one place and allow himself to be cut down. With Vulkan's curses ringing in his ears, Corax had ordered his Legion to retreat by any means necessary. Emergency rendezvous points had been broadcast over the comm-net; coded, but Corax wondered if the traitors had access to the Raven Guard's communications ciphers. When the survivors had regathered their strength, the primarch would have the Techmarines establish new security protocols.

In this way, with regret giving way to immediate needs, Corax pushed aside the empty gulf that threatened to swallow him. As his mind filled with dispositions and orders, he turned back to the remnants of his honour guard. A

Techmarine, Stradon, fussed over a tangled mess of ceramite casing and steel feathers. Stradon looked up as Corax returned. The Techmarine's helmeted head cocked to one side in dismay, his voice a hoarse whisper.

'Your flight pack… I could cannibalise some parts from the Thunderhawk perhaps… Reverse-fit some of the attitude jets…'

'Leave it,' said Corax. He cast his gaze over the Space Marines looking expectantly at their primarch. 'It will be some time before this raven flies again.'

The valley was filled with a deep mist, but there was darker smog amongst the haze – the smoke of engines. Corax was crouched at an observation point high on the western side of the gorge, his four commanders with him. The primarch had removed his winged helmet and listened intently, his superhuman ears better than any autosense the technorati could yet devise. He could tell every vehicle by its unique timbre of roar and grind of gears: Rhino transports, Land Raiders, Predator tanks, Thunderstrike assault guns. This last told him who it was that advanced up the valley, for only one Legion employed artillery of that fashion.

'Iron Warriors,' announced the primarch.

There were growls of disgust from the officers around him. Of those that had turned traitor, the Iron Warriors were reserved for especial hatred. The Raven Guard had always considered them brutal, simplistic in their tactics. Corax had never spoken his doubts openly, but he had not shared Perturabo's approach to war. His former brother viewed conflict as a simple matter of exchanging punishment until one side capitulated. He was the sort that would stand face-to-face with a foe and trade blows, relying on obstinacy to prevail. More than once Perturabo had hinted he thought Corax cowardly for his preferred strategy of hit-and-run.

Corax cared little for the criticisms of the other primarchs. Their Legions were larger than his, their Terran forces bolstered by populous home planets. Deliverance had not the vast resources of many other worlds and only a few thousand more legionaries had swelled the ranks of the Raven Guard. Such a situation had necessitated a certain approach to war, one that Corax had learnt well when he had led the uprising against the slavemasters. Though it was the Raven Guard who had become the superior-armed force, Corax had never forgotten the hard-learnt lessons of that guerrilla war. Had he done as Perturabo believed – or as Vulkan had decided – his warriors would all be dead.

Through careful withdrawal under fire, some had escaped to rejoin the primarch. His four thousand legionaries were little compared to the might he had commanded only a dozen days earlier, but they were still Space Marines and

they could still fight. Corax was determined that the dropsite massacre would not go unanswered. Perturabo's warriors would learn that sometimes the concealed blow was the most lethal.

Corax listened intently to the mechanical noises echoing along the valley, pinpointing each source.

'Fourteen Rhinos, three Land Raiders, six Predators, three Thunderstrikes,' the primarch told his officers. None doubted his word, his eyes and ears more accurate than any scanner they had remaining in their armoury. 'Advancing in double column, six transports in the vanguard, half a kilometre ahead. Two outriding squadrons of bikes, twenty in total.'

The primarch looked up. The cloud in the highlands was low. He heard no jets. It was unlikely that the Iron Warriors had aerial forces, they would be virtually useless in this weather. Further up, beyond the atmosphere, their frigates and battle barges peered down upon Isstvan V with their long-range augurs, but finding a force as small as Corax's would be all but impossible. It was a gamble, but Corax had to hope that the recon column – one of three that had been scouring the hills since the massacre – did not have attached orbital support.

'When we attack, they will assume an arrowpoint defensive stance,' Corax continued. 'Land Raiders to the fore, Predators along the flanks, assault guns and transports as reserve. That is just the sort of fight these bastards like. Let's not give them that.'

'Diversionary delayed attack, lord?' suggested Agapito, Commander of the Talons, the Tactical companies that formed the fighting backbone of the newly reorganised Raven Guard.

Corax nodded. He turned to Commander Aloni, freshly appointed leader of the Assault companies – the Falcons.

'Agapito will set up a base of fire in the eastern head of the valley,' said the primarch. 'Give the Iron Warriors ten minutes to assemble their formation before attacking the rear. Agapito, I need you to draw their attention to you as much as possible. Hit them hard and hold your ground. Retaliation will be intense. You have to take it. If the enemy think you are going to fall back they will form up for pursuit, which will leave a rearguard right in front of Aloni's companies. Don't allow that to happen.'

The commanders nodded their understanding. Another officer, Solaro, spoke next.

'What about the outriders, lord?'

'Use your bike squads to give them something to chase. Draw them to the

west. Aloni, slant your attack from the east.'

There were affirmatives from the officers, followed by a moment's quiet until Aloni voiced the question they were all anxious to ask.

'And you, lord? Where will you be fighting?'

'I'll attack from the south-east, as the second wing of the delayed attack.'

'Is that wise?' asked Agapito. 'You disbanded your bodyguard into the other companies.'

Corax stood up to his full height and unslung his heavy bolter, holding it easily in his left hand. The towering primarch smiled down at his officers.

'That was for appearance. Do you think I actually *need* a bodyguard?'

The valley was alight with heavy weapons fire and bolter rounds. Two Rhinos were smouldering wrecks and a Land Raider burned fiercely from its engine compartment. The traitors' return fire was intense, a stream of shells and blasts that seared away the concealing mists. Detonations wracked the boulder-strewn hillside where Agapito's Talons poured fire on the Iron Warriors.

Corax watched the exchange from a narrow defile a few hundred metres behind the Iron Warriors' positions. He saw the crews of the Thunderstrikes readying their big guns and knew it was time to act. He had expected as much, but hadn't wanted Aloni to attack too soon for fear of revealing the strategy. Corax felt no remorse at deceiving his own commanders – it was for their survival that the primarch had decided against them attacking early. He could handle this situation on his own.

The primarch broke from cover, pounding across the pebble-strewn hillside with long strides. Surprise would be his first weapon. As the gravel sprayed underfoot, a lone Iron Warrior, his silver armour dappled with water droplets, turned towards Corax, perhaps somehow hearing the crunching footfalls over the din of the battle. The primarch acted without hesitation. Stooping in his run, he snatched up a shard of rock. With a flick of his arm, he hurled the stone at the Iron Warrior. As a dark blur it struck the Space Marine in the throat and erupted from the back of his neck, silently felling him. Corax sprinted onwards, readying his heavy bolter.

The Thunderstrikes opened up on the Raven Guard, three enormous blossoms of fire enveloping the hillside. Corax could not spare a glance for the devastation caused, he was utterly focussed on his targets. Fifty metres behind the assault guns he stopped and took up a firing position, bringing the heavy bolter up to his left shoulder as an ordinary man might heft a rifle.

He sighted on the closest Thunderstrike, eyes narrowed. He aimed at a point just above the armoured maintenance hatch in the vehicle's flank, beyond which sat the primary engine relays. The first roaring salvo of bolts hit the exact mark, ripping through the armour plates. A moment later smoke was billowing from the Thunderstrike's engines before a ball of fire engulfed the assault gun sending torn pieces of metal flying in all directions.

Corax had no time to admire his handiwork. His following fusillade tore into the flexible armour of the next Thunderstrike's gun mounting, smashing gears, jamming the cannon in place. Silver shapes spilled from the Rhinos and ran towards Corax but he ignored them. He primed three krak grenades, easily holding all of them in the palm of his hand. With an overhand toss, he lobbed the grenades onto the engine vents of the third Thunderstrike, shattering the grille and rupturing fuel lines. Soon the vehicle was ablaze along the left side of its hull. As the crew emerged smouldering from the hatches Corax gunned them down with raking fire.

Bolter rounds were pattering from Corax's armour, nothing more than a distraction. Taking in everything at a glance, the primarch turned his attention to a Predator tank slewing in his direction. Its lascannon sponsons swivelled towards him.

Twin blasts of energy exploded around the primarch, hurling him to his back, his chest plastron a semi-molten slurry, the heavy bolter a mangled ruin in his hand. Pain flared across his chest but disappeared as quickly as it came. Corax tossed the heavy bolter aside and pulled himself to his feet as the Predator's turret opened fire, autocannon rounds shrieking past the primarch.

He broke into a loping run, shells ringing from his helmet and shoulder pads as he sprinted into the teeth of the metal storm. He cared nothing for the danger, except to embrace it. This was what he had been created to do and joy sang in his veins.

Corax's joy was further fuelled by a righteousness of purpose. He looked at the Iron Warriors and saw only cowardly bullies revealed in their true nature. The primarch had been raised fighting such tyrants. To find them within the ranks of the Legiones Astartes appalled him in a way that nothing else ever had. The slavemasters of Lycaeus had been human. They had been fallible. The Space Marines had no such excuse. They had been chosen for their strength of body and purpose. They had sworn binding oaths of service to the Emperor and the growing empire of mankind. They were liberators, not oppressors.

With a feral roar, Corax leapt upon the Predator. Driven by his indignant rage,

he drove his fist through the driver's slit, crushing the skull of the Iron Warrior within. Jumping onto the turret, the primarch tore away the hatch covers, sending their jagged remains scything through the Iron Warriors squads advancing on him from the transports. The tank's commander looked up in surprise as dim light flooded the interior of the Predator. Corax reached in, his gauntlet enveloping the Space Marine's head. The helmet resisted for a moment before giving in to the titanic pressure, the tank commander's skull collapsing between Corax's fingers.

Dropping to the ground, the primarch grabbed one of the sponson lascannons and braced a foot against the tank's hull. With a heave of his shoulders, Corax tore the mounting free, the gunner within dragged halfway out of the hole. Corax brought his fist down onto the Iron Warrior's back, the force of the blow cracking his armour and shattering his spine.

The bolter fire was becoming too intense to ignore. Like a rain shower that suddenly becomes a hail storm, it had grown in vehemence. Four squads of Iron Warriors poured their fire at the primarch, legs braced, muzzle flares gleaming from their armour. The primarch hurled the remains of the predator sponson through them, crushing three Space Marines.

The smoking trail of a missile cut through the air a moment before the projectile crashed into Corax's left shoulder, sending shards of ceramite in all directions, staggering the primarch to one knee. He spat a wordless curse as he surged forwards once more, cutting to the left and right as balls of plasma and more rockets screamed around him.

Corax covered the hundred metres in a few seconds, coming at the nearest squad from their flank. His fists buckled the faceplates of the first two Space Marines. As their bodies slumped, the primarch snatched up their weapons and stormed into the rest of the squad, a blazing bolter in each hand. The bolts hammered into the Iron Warriors, half a dozen more left on the ground before the ammunition belts were exhausted. Corax tossed the weapons aside.

The squad's sergeant leapt at Corax, a screeching chainsword in his right hand, bolt pistol blazing in the left. The primarch swatted away the whirring teeth of the chainsword and grabbed the sergeant's elbow. With a twist and a wrench, he tore out the Iron Warrior's arm and swung it around, the razor-sharp blades of the chainsword biting deep into the sergeant's helmet. Corax threw the bloody limb aside and grabbed a grenade from the fallen sergeant's belt, slamming his fist into the chest of another Space Marine, the explosive detonating in his grasp.

Corax heard the whine of hydraulics to his right as he shook his numbed

fingers. A Land Raider opened its assault ramp. Silhouetted against the ruddy light within, a squad of bulky Terminators advanced with purpose. They did not waste the ammunition of their combi-bolters but came forward quickly, flexing lightning-enveloped claws.

More detonations and bolter fire rocked the Iron Warriors column as the Falcons attacked, Aloni's companies descending on the traitors with jump packs flaring. The Talons pushed forwards from the valley ahead, lascannons and missile launchers cutting trails of death through the surrounded Iron Warriors.

The Terminators hesitated in their advance as anarchy reigned around them. Corax reached behind him and pulled a fresh weapon from his belt. A long twin-barbed whip uncoiled in his hands, writhing with a life of its own. The primarch had requested the Mechanicum of Mars to fashion the lash for him. The irony of wielding such a tyrant's weapon in a noble cause pleased Corax. Inside his helmet, the primarch grinned in anticipation.

Flickers of energy sparking along its length, the whip flicked out in Corax's hand and caught the closest Terminator with a thunderous crack, slicing him from shoulder to waist. His remains fell to the ground in three, wisps of smoke drifting from the neatly sliced body parts.

The Terminators opened fire but it was too late. Corax's whip slashed the head from another and cut the legs from under a third. Aloni bounded past in his ebon armour, his plasma pistol spitting incandescent blasts.

Corax felt a surge of exultation and raised the whip above his head.

'No mercy!'

The Raven Guard picked the dead clean of everything that could be taken. They worked their way amongst the fallen, slaying those traitors that still lived whilst Sixx and his fellow Apothecaries did what they could to attend the loyalist wounded. Weapons were ripped from dead grasps and ammunition taken from the belts and packs of the fallen.

It was with some distaste that Corax had ordered such plundering, but the circumstances offered him no choice. If his warriors were to continue fighting, they needed supplies. They had to move swiftly, the attack on the column fixing the Raven Guard in one place. Corax wanted to be many kilometres away before any more forces arrived in the area.

Survival was the key. Strike and withdraw and live to strike again. This gross betrayal would not go unnoticed. The Emperor would learn of what had befallen his Legions at Isstvan and his retribution would be swift, of that Corax was sure.

He was determined that his warriors would live long enough to see it.

Valerius could see the doubt in the eyes of his subordinates. They were wary. He knew he presented a less-than-inspiring image, cheeks drawn, eyes dark and haunted. For thirty nights he had snatched no more than a few hours of sleep, waking early every morning with the stench of burning flesh in his nostrils and the cries of the dying in his ears. His continued applications to Commander Branne had all fallen on deaf ears and the Praefector was desperate.

He had to go to Isstvan. Nothing else would relieve his foreboding.

Valerius watched the columns of black-masked soldiers marching onto the orbital shuttles, confident that he was doing the right thing. Massive rams lifted the craft out of the sealed hangars into the launch domes above. Beyond the faint blue sheen of the forcefield, plasma jets roared into life, taking the slab-sided shuttles into low orbit over Deliverance where they delivered their living cargo to the immense warp-capable transports of the Imperial Army. His command staff had done as he asked and the regiment had been mustered and supplied ready for the journey to Isstvan. Despite their compliance, Valerius had detected an undertone of confusion and unease amongst his officers and turned his attention back to them, pulling himself straight despite the weariness he felt in his bones.

‘Fifty per cent of the infantry and eighty per cent of the armour has been embarked, Praefector,’ reported First Tribune Marius. He referred to a wafer-thin data-slate before continuing. ‘Seven transports are squared away and ready to leave. The captains of the three others report that they will be warp-worthy within five hours. Frigates *Escalation*, *Garius* and *Vendetta* stand ready for escort service.’

Marius paused and exchanged a glance with the other Tribunes and Aquilons. Valerius guessed Marius had been nominated as spokesman for the command staff’s concerns. It was unlikely anybody would have volunteered for such a task.

‘What is it?’ snapped Valerius.

Marius’s reply was reluctant and he again looked at his companions for encouragement.

‘Praefector, we have yet to receive orders confirmation from Commander Branne, nor launch vectors from the Ravenspire.’

Valerius cleared his throat, uncomfortable.

‘Such verification will be coming shortly. Continue with the boarding

manifests.’

Marius and the others hesitated.

‘We are worried about your health, Praefector,’ said Marius. ‘You have not been well of late.’

Valerius summoned his resolve, drawing on the generations of breeding and military command that had paved his way to his position as a Therion Praefector.

‘I gave you an order, Tribune! Be prepared to leave orbit as soon as possible. This is *my* regiment, seconded to Lord Corax himself. Order confirmations and launch vectors will be forthcoming. I will travel to the Ravenspire to deal with any delay. Is there anything else?’

Marius opened his mouth and then closed it. The others darted angry glances at the First Tribune but remained silent.

‘Good, I am happy that I have made myself clear. Go and attend to your duties.’

Valerius received the salutes of the officers with a nod and watched them turn and disperse into the companies of Imperial soldiers forming up for boarding. He breathed out heavily, and could feel his hands shaking. It was just fatigue, he was sure. Nothing more serious.

With another cough he called for Pelon to bring forward his aircar. He would have to go to the Ravenspire, and that meant another confrontation with Branne. Have the courage of your convictions, Valerius told himself. Even to himself, his words sounded weak.

‘This is insubordination!’ roared Branne, looming over Valerius. The Praefector could not help but shrink away from the intimidating bulk of the commander. He hated himself for showing such weakness, it was an affront to the uniform he wore. He was a loyal officer of the Emperor, not some tutor-yard weakling. Yet the Praefector’s protests died in his throat as Branne’s tirade continued. The commander paced across his private chambers, where the walls were hung with paintings depicting idealised scenes from the liberation of Deliverance. Lord Corax featured in all of them.

‘It is precisely because of this… this idiocy that command of the Imperial Army was given to the Legions. A few dreams and you’re ready to head straight into a highly-volatile warzone. Do you really think that Corax wants your regiment hanging around, something else for him to worry about? Leave aside the nonsense of these dreams and consider this. If what you say is true, what difference will one regiment make? Horus’s forces are Legiones Astartes! If the

whole might of the Raven Guard, not to mention six – *six!* – more Legions, are not enough to quell Horus's rebellion, what can your troops achieve?'

At this, Valerius smarted and he stepped forward, fist raised.

'We'd actually *be there*! No, we are not Space Marines, we are not the Emperor's favoured. We are simply men. Men that believe in the Imperial Truth, in the forging of this new Empire every bit as much as you!'

'Men are weak,' replied Branne and Valerius exploded with rage, his frayed psyche finally giving vent. He did not shout; his voice descended to a spite-filled whisper.

'It is not a normal man that leads this rebellion. Horus is a Space Marine, one of yours! The best of you, if that is to be believed anymore.'

'Be careful what you say next, Valerius,' snarled Branne, fists balled by his sides. 'It is not wise to stand in judgement of your betters.'

Valerius was shocked, speechless. He turned and stalked a few paces away from Branne, quivering with indignation. He had no argument that would sway the Space Marine. In a way, the commander was correct. His legionaries were far superior to Valerius and his warriors. They were created by the Emperor to be physically greater than any mortal human. Their armour was better, their weapons the best that the Mechanicum could create. But that was all that they were – soldiers, war-bringers, conquerors.

Valerius calmed himself before turning back to Branne. He was about to offer a conciliatory gesture when Branne suddenly looked at Valerius with narrowed eyes. The Space Marine's whole body tensed and for a moment Valerius was filled with an animal fear, that of a prey seeing the predator ready to pounce.

'Perhaps there is some other reason you are so eager to travel to Isstvan with all of your warriors? Maybe it is not to Lord Corax's aid that you would go, but to the rebels'.'

Valerius was horrified at the suggestion but Branne continued before he could offer any argument.

'Perhaps you think you are too good to serve under the Legion? Is that it? Perhaps your dreams are a result of tortured pride, a symptom of a badly bruised ego? Maybe you feel that you would be better off serving Horus?'

'My pride is in this uniform,' hissed Valerius, tugging at the sash across his chest. 'You know why I wear the red? My father gave his blood for the Emperor! He fought and died beside the Legions when they came to Therion. This is a badge of my family's dedication to the Emperor, a sign of the Emperor's trust in my family. It means as much to me as that sigil upon your tabard. Do not dare to

suppose that I would besmirch this honour!’

Branne was taken aback by the vehemence of Valerius. He blinked several times, as might a large dog when swiped across the nose by a feisty young pup.

‘The weakness of men?’ Valerius muttered, not daring to look at Branne. ‘Yes, the Legiones Astartes united Earth and conquered the galaxy. Behind their guns and swords, we forged across the stars and claimed so many thousands of worlds for the Emperor. You created the Imperium, of that I am sure. But without us weak, frail men, what would you be? Who pilots the ships that carry you, grows the crops that feed you, makes the weapons you wield and raises the children that will be your future generations? Not the Space Marines.’

Branne’s hesitation lasted only a moment and his scowl returned.

‘This is not a debate, Praefector. Were you a pilot, a farmer, a techpriest or a father, you could say such things. You are not, you are an officer of the Imperial Army and you answer to the Legion. I am ranking commander on Deliverance and I order you stand down your regiment. You may not leave for Isstvan. You are not welcome there.’

Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm Valerius. He straightened and took a deep breath, thinking the unthinkable. The Praefector steadied himself and looked Branne directly in the eye.

‘And if I choose to go anyway?’

Branne’s stare was as hard and uncompromising as the suit of armour that stood in the corner of the chamber.

‘Deliverance has many orbital weapons.’

‘Reminds me of Eblana,’ rasped Agapito. He peered out of the cave mouth as rain sheeted down, turning the grassland outside into a quagmire.

‘Aye,’ said Sergeant Lancrato, another of the Terran veterans who had been at the pacification of the marsh-city. He laughed at a recollection. ‘Remember Hadraig leading us into that bog? Up to our arses in mud, starshells overhead, mortar bombs landing all around us.’

Agapito did not join in his companion’s humour. His tone was sombre.

‘I’d rather have that stinking marsh than this. At least we knew where we were going, even if it was difficult to get to.’

‘We can’t stay in one place, it would be suicide. You know that. We’ll hide out in these caves while we can and then move on.’

‘Yes, I know that, but it galls me to run from these traitorous swine.’

‘I also,’ rumbled a voice from the vast cavern.

Corax emerged from the gloom, divested of his armour. The primarch was clad in a black undersuit, immense muscles criss-crossed with wires and circuits woven into its fabric. His dark eyes stared outside for a moment and then fell upon the two Space Marines.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ the primarch announced.

‘In this?’ Lancrato’s laugh was incredulous. ‘A strange time for a stroll.’

Corax gave a lopsided smile.

‘I never had fresh air before my first planetfall with the Legion. Can’t get enough of it now.’

‘Where are you going, lord?’ asked Agapito.

‘To have a look around. It’s been thirty days since the drop and there’s been no word at all from the Salamanders or Iron Hands. We can’t risk any comms broadcasts, Horus’s followers may use them to locate us. I need to find out what’s happening, make contact with the other Legions. I may be gone for several days. It will be safe to remain here while the bad weather holds. If it clears before I return, move the force west to the Lerghan Ridge and I will meet you there.’

With that, the primarch strode out into the rain.

Corax headed towards the Urgall Hills, swiftly covering the kilometres with easy strides at a pace he could sustain for many days. He avoided the more open plains and kept to the ridgelines and valleys, never exposing himself upon a horizon, circling around the remnants of villages and towns.

He did not allow himself to think too much as he ran. There was little point to it. For thirty days he had asked himself why this had happened; wondered how Horus had turned so many to his cause. It didn’t matter how Horus had created this revolt, the pressing matter was that the Warmaster had. If an effective counterstrike was to be made, those that remained loyal to the Emperor had to come together. If they remained divided they would be picked off, one Legion at a time.

The primarch occupied himself with thoughts of strategy, recalling everything about the topography and landscape of Isstvan V. He mentally overlaid the map with the forces of the Legions ranged against him, estimating their strengths, where they would be disposed and where there would be gaps in their defences.

As dawn broke, the primarch reached Tor Venghis, a mount that overlooked the dropsite where so many of his warriors had been slain. From this vantage point he looked out across the Urgall Hills. Huge dropships dominated the

landscape, blazoned with the liveries of the traitors: Sons of Horus, Iron Warriors, World Eaters, Emperor's Children, Death Guard, Alpha Legion, even the Word Bearers.

Corax's heart fell at the sight. So many had turned! It seemed impossible that those who only months before had fought valiantly alongside the Raven Guard were now hunting them down. Despite his earlier thoughts on the futility of understanding their treachery, Corax could not fight the urge to find out more. He needed to get closer, to walk amongst this devastation so that he might better understand it.

So it was that the primarch of the Raven Guard stole into the Urgall Depression and drew upon that ability he had possessed since his first memory but had revealed to no one. He knew not how it came to be, but if he focused his thoughts, he could pass unseen amongst others. Long he had honed his power in the fighting against the slavemasters, walking through their defences in plain sight. His followers had not been aware of his special talent, but there had been plenty about their mysterious leader they had not known.

It was not that he literally disappeared – more than one encounter with an automatic scanner had taught him that – it was that the minds of others ignored Corax if he wished it. Like a predator that only recognises the shapes of its prey, those that Corax wished to deceive simply did not register his presence. Such was their unconscious disbelief that they even refused to acknowledge a return on a scanner sweep or the glow of a thermal monitor. To any naked eye Corax could, for want of a better term, become invisible.

Only one other knew of this – the Emperor. As he picked his way down to the depression the primarch thought about that day when the Emperor came to Deliverance, to be reunited with his progeny. He remembered the looks of adulation and adoration on Corax's guerrilla warriors as the Emperor had stepped down alone from his shuttle.

Corax's memory was as sharp as a sword point, but even he could not quite remember the Emperor's face, though it was clear he had not seen what had so struck the others with awe. The Emperor had seemed young in body, but his eyes were as old as anything Corax had ever seen. He was of no particular stature, neither tall nor short, fat nor thin.

'You recognise me?' the Emperor had asked when the two had withdrawn from the others. He had been clearly surprised by Corax's reaction.

'As if from an old dream, yes,' Corax had replied. 'I thought you would be taller.'

‘Interesting,’ had been the Emperor’s brief reply.

It was then that the Emperor had explained to Corax what he truly was – a primarch, one of twenty created by him to lead Mankind’s conquest of the stars. Corax had not doubted a word of it, the presence of the Emperor made everything else fall into place. They had talked for a whole day, of the Emperor’s plans and the ongoing Great Crusade. Corax told the Emperor of what had passed on Lycaeus and of the continuing conflict with the planet below. That day they pledged support and loyalty to each other and the Emperor had smiled and nodded.

As Corax had guided the Emperor back to his shuttle, the Master of Mankind had laid a gentle hand on Corax’s arm, his deep blue eyes gleaming. Corax remembered the warmth he had felt, elation coming from the Emperor’s parting words even though the primarch had made no mention of his peculiar ability.

‘You will never have to hide again.’

The primarch snorted at his sentimentality. He was hiding again, of that there was no doubt. He was not scurrying through some ventilation duct, or slipping past a guard post, but Corax suddenly felt as if all the years between then and now had been for nothing.

He looked at the devastation wrought at the dropsite. The Iron Warriors were fortifying the hills, as was their wont. Columns of Space Marines, on foot and in their armoured vehicles, stretched as far as the eye could see. Under the dark clouds their camps sprawled across the Urgall Depression like a stain, but there was something else that darkened the grassy hillsides and wind-swept basin.

Corpses. Tens of thousands of them. The traitors had left the dead where they had fallen, perhaps as a testament to their victory, perhaps unwilling to sweep away the shameful evidence of their treachery.

The slaughter was unimaginable, even to one who had spent his entire life at war. So many dead; legionaries dead, by the hand of other legionaries. This was no mere rebellion, this was something far greater. Rebels raised their voices openly against those they despised. These traitors had plotted in the shadows and bided their time. Who could say how long Horus had been secretly working against the will of the Emperor?

With a shock, Corax realised that he might have been an unwitting conspirator in this uprising. How many of Horus’s orders had he followed without question? How many times had he discussed his strategies, his plans, with the likes of Angron and Fulgrim?

Cloaked from view, Corax wandered amidst the bloodied piles of flesh and

shattered armour. He heard harsh laughter from the traitor camps and ignored it. He saw the colours of the Raven Guard next to that of the Salamanders. Company banners lay tattered and broken in the gore-slicked grass. Here and there he saw the livery of the traitors, flecks of bright colour amongst the black and drab greens of the loyalists.

Corax could follow the course of the battle by the dead left in its wake. A fighting retreat here, a last stand around a banner there, a counter-assault against a position over there. Like a story, the scene played out, the Salamanders falling back into an ever smaller pocket of resistance, the Raven Guard breaking out in whatever directions they could. A psychotic charge from Angron's World Eaters cleaving into the Salamanders' defensive cordon; gun batteries of the Iron Warriors on the high ground; an encircling attack by the Word Bearers. Far away, the metal colours of the Iron Hands glittered in the rising sun, where Ferrus Manus had led them against the Emperor's Children.

Of his fellow primarchs, there was no sign.

Corax knelt beside the body of a Raven Guard, his chestplate rent open, his ribcage splayed. His armour bore the markings of a veteran, one of those that had come from Terra and made Deliverance his new home.

Corax had seen untold atrocities and, in the name of Enlightenment and the future had even committed a few. Of these he was not proud, but he was sure that his cause had always been just. He had seen the slavers throttle babies to punish their mothers, and bloodthirsty Khrave fall upon columns of refugees. Never once had any of it caused Corax the slightest hesitation. War was not glorious, it was a desperate, messy business. But it had been his business, one in which he had excelled. This massacre, it was beyond the pale.

For the first and last time in his life, Corax cried. He cried not for the loss of life, though it was great. He cried not for the degradation that had been heaped upon his dead warriors, though it was obscene. He cried for all Space Marines, for the shame that Horus had brought upon them. They had been the Emperor's trusted sword, and they had betrayed him. It mattered not that Corax himself had remained loyal. He was of the Legiones Astartes and the shame of one was the shame of all.

'Will they ever trust us again?' he whispered as a single tear rolled down his cheek and dropped onto the fallen Raven Guard.

Should they trust us, was the next question, one that Corax did not want to ask and certainly could not answer. The Emperor made us gods and mankind followed us, Corax thought heavily. In us he poured the hopes and dreams of

humanity, and we raised ourselves up above them. He gave us armies to command and the resources of the galaxy to draw upon. What have we done with that? When we first awoke, what did we do with the power he gave us? Set ourselves up as warrior-kings, with planets as vassals and star systems as our fiefdoms. Not all of us follow Horus, but none of us are beyond blame. Perhaps it is better not to trust us. Perhaps the galaxy is better ruled by normal men, who live and die and whose ambitions are not so grand.

Depression weighed down Corax as he continued his search. There was no sign of Ferrus Manus or Vulkan, though he did not know whether that boded well or ill. There was but one truth to face. The Salamanders and Iron Hands were no more. If aid was to come, it would be from outside Isstvan V.

The Raven Guard would have to fight on alone.

The ensign's tone was worried as he turned from his console aboard the bridge of Valerius's flagship, the *Remarkable*.

'Praefector, I'm detecting power surges from the orbital platforms in our grid. Weapons are priming!'

Valerius looked to his comms officer.

'Get me an immediate relay to the Ravenspire, and put it through to my cabin.'

Without waiting for the response, the Praefector hurried from the bridge into his private chamber. He flicked on the vid-screen and paced back and forth across the narrow room as the display filled with multicoloured static.

Commander Branne's voice cut through Valerius's agitation.

'I warned this would happen.'

Valerius spun towards the screen and saw the Space Marine's face filling the display. The commander's expression was blank, giving no sign of what he was about to do.

'Surely you cannot be considering opening fire on Imperial ships?'

'It is not my decision, Praefector. You have disobeyed a direct command from your superiors. What happens next is up to you.'

Valerius fought the urge to claw at his hair in frustration. He could hear the cawing of ravens even when awake, and the corners of the cabin seemed to flicker with flames.

'The deaths of your men will be on your hands, not mine,' insisted Branne.

'How can you say that?' shrieked Valerius. 'It is by your command that they will be killed. You would slay them out of hand? I cannot believe that even you are that inhuman.'

‘These are inhuman times, Praefector. In following your unconfirmed orders, your officers and men place themselves in conspiracy with your insubordination.’

‘They’re just following *my* orders,’ growled Valerius. ‘To do otherwise would be mutinous.’

‘Yet you choose to commit that crime on their behalf. I say it again – this is your doing, not mine.’

Valerius’s hands formed claws as he tried to grasp some argument or line of reasoning that would persuade Branne not to open fire. He could think of nothing. His entire claim to this endeavour was based on a dream that tormented him and a deep feeling of dread, and nothing more.

Then it came to him. Valerius rounded on the screen with a last, desperate hope in his heart.

‘What if it is you and not me that is wrong?’

Branne furrowed his brow in confusion as he answered.

‘My orders were explicit, as were yours. The chain of command is equally clear. Any error is yours, not mine.’

‘But think of the consequences! Think not of the arguments and reasons for a moment, but think only of what happens if we follow your path and not mine.’

Branne shook his head, unable to understand Valerius’s argument. The Praefector continued at pace, scrabbling after the words as a drowning man might lunge for a lifeline.

‘If you are right and I am wrong, what harm is caused?’

‘If my worst suspicions are correct, you may aid the traitors.’

Valerius nodded at this, thinking as quickly as his fatigue-numbed mind would allow.

‘Then come with me. Bring your legionaries aboard and hold a gun to my head. I would be the first to pay if there is any hint of treachery in my actions. In that circumstance, what possible gain would there be for me?’

Branne shook his head again but said nothing, so Valerius plunged on.

‘And what if this is just a wild chase? What have we lost by acting? Nothing!’

The Space Marine remained unconvinced and Valerius moved in for his final argument.

‘But consider this. Think of the consequences if, against everything you believe and have been trained for, I am right. Think! If what I say is true, no matter how, then what is the price we pay for not acting? If you come with me, history might remember you as the commander that lost his pride because he

allowed a delusional army officer to fool him? Your reputation might suffer, that is true. On the other hand, would you instead be remembered as the commander that stayed at home, too proud to listen to those that warned him of danger, while his primarch needed him?'

Valerius could see his words sinking in as Branne's frown deepened even further. The Space Marine's jaw worked incessantly as he turned the words over in his mind, analysing them as he might a battlefield situation, examining them from different perspectives.

'I do not believe you,' said Branne. 'Though the consequences of inaction are far greater, the more likely risk is the loss of my honour, by a considerable factor. I see no benefit in your course of action.'

Valerius fell to his knees, hands held out imploringly towards the flickering image of the commander.

'Lord Corax needs us! He needs *you*!'

'And if he doesn't? If I go to Isstvan and he welcomes me with scorn?'

Valerius rose to his feet and pulled his hand across his chest in salute, fist grasping the sash.

'I will give up the red and offer my life as forfeit for my mistake. I will take the dishonour, even to the ruination of my family.'

An internal broadcast cut across the transmission from the Ravenspire. It was the officer at the scanner arrays, his voice timorous, broken.

'Praefector? Orbital batteries have locked on to our vessels! What should we do? Praefector?'

Valerius cut the link and stared at Branne.

'It is your decision, commander. My fate is in your hands.'

'We will be avenged,' Corax told his legionaries.

Behind him the Ghular salt plains stretched for hundreds of kilometres, offering no sanctuary to his depleted army. They had fought as hard as they could, never getting caught, always moving. Now there was nowhere left to run. The Raven Guard were trapped, sheltering in the last cover that had been left to them while the traitors scoured Urgall.

'Have you ever seen such a thing?' asked Agapito.

Corax shook his head. The might of the World Eaters Legion was arrayed against them. Tens of thousands of warriors poured up the slope, only a few kilometres away. From this distance they were lines of blue and white, though much tainted with red. Some of the World Eaters had taken to daubing the blood

of the fallen on their armour, marring their Imperial livery in defiance of the Emperor.

‘He is with them,’ said Corax.

‘Who?’ said Alconi.

‘Angron, my headstrong brother,’ replied Corax, pointing into the mass of warriors. Amidst the blue and white armour strode a giant clad in red and gold, a great cloak of fur upon his back. Brazen chains were wrapped about his hands and wrists, a massive chainaxe in each hand. Corax could hear the savage war cries of Angron’s lobotomised warriors, their chanting flowing up the hillside as a challenge to the Raven Guard.

Corax flexed his grip on his whip as he watched the World Eaters Primarch stalking forwards. He knew this was the end. He had barely three thousand Space Marines against the might of a whole legion. He would have to face Angron, and he knew he would fall to the World Eater. There was not another primarch that could best him in single combat, save perhaps Horus, and maybe Sanguinius. Corax was an immortal lord of battle, but Angron was war incarnate. The Raven Guard had seen him leading his troops through the breach at Hell’s Anvil and witnessed his talent for destruction during the Siege of Gehenna.

No, there was not a doubt in Corax’s mind that Angron would slay him, and take great pleasure in the act.

Corax recalled part of the conversation he had shared with the Emperor on Deliverance. The primarch was not sure he yet understood what the Emperor had been saying, for he had said a great many things that referred to the time before his Unification of Terra, references to ancient Earth and his own life that were far beyond Corax’s knowledge.

‘Each of those parts that they put into me, I gave to each of you,’ the Emperor had said. Corax had asked who had put what into the Emperor but he had shaken his head and refused to answer, telling Corax that it was not important anymore. Reunited with his primarchs, he would be whole once again.

The Raven Guard’s leader wondered what part of the Emperor had been put into a beast like Angron. He shuddered to think what Horus had promised the World Eater in return for his betrayal of the Emperor. Conquest, no doubt, and glory in battle. Angron had craved these things more than any other primarch, though Corax and his brothers had all been created with a fierce military pride. What else, Corax thought. What do you gain from this rebellion against the Emperor?

As Corax watched the hordes of the World Eaters streaming towards him, he guessed at an answer. Freedom. Freedom from holding back. Freedom from restraint. Freedom from guilt and orders. But freedom was not without its drawbacks. The primarchs and their warriors needed structure, needed purpose to focus their martial instincts. Without the guiding hand, once provided by the Emperor, now manipulated by Horus, the Legions were nothing more than a bolter without an eye to aim it. Was the wildness, the savagery of the army that raged towards him something that hid inside every Legion?

Corax could not believe it was so. Duty, honour, loyalty. For the strong to fight for the weak, that was purpose. Freedom of the type craved by Angron was an empty existence, removed of all measure and boundary, so that no act had meaning because it served no further end. Corax had freed Deliverance from the slavemasters and then guided them into the fold of the Imperium. Perhaps he had merely swapped one master for another, but at least he was free to choose the master he would serve.

Relieved at his conclusion – that he had not in him the means to become a tyrant like Angron – Corax relaxed and waited. Legionaries fighting legionaries was a horrific thing, but in his heart the primarch knew that he would rather fall to the hand of one of his brothers than suffer any other fate. The Space Marines had pounded this new Imperium out of the rawness of the galaxy and it was fitting that it would be them who would decide its fate, for good or ill.

The first missiles from the World Eaters whirlwinds were streaking through the sky towards the Raven Guard. They refused to take shelter, proud to stand their ground against this enemy. The explosions tore through the squads, slaying dozens. Corax stood amidst it all as in the eye of a hurricane. His officers looked to him and drew strength from his bold defiance of the World Eaters.

More vapour trails crossed the open skies, but something was wrong with their direction. They came from behind the Raven Guard.

Corax looked up and saw broad-winged aircraft plunging down from the scattering of cloud, missile pods rippling with fire. A swathe of detonations cut through the World Eaters, ripping through their advance companies. Incendiary bombs blossomed in the heart of the approaching army, scattering white-hot promethium over the steep slopes. Corax looked on with incredulity as blistering pulses of fire descended from orbit, cutting great gouges into Angron’s Legion.

The roar of jets became deafening as dropships descended on pillars of fire. Black dropships emblazoned with the sigil of the Raven Guard. The Space

Marines scattered to give the landing craft space to make planetfall. As soon as their thick hydraulic legs touched the ground, ramps whined down and boarding gateways opened.

At first the Raven Guard were in stunned disbelief. A few shouted warnings, believing the dropships to be enemy craft painted to deceive. The comm crackled in Corax's ear. He did not recognise the voice.

'Lord Corax!'

'Receiving your transmission.'

'This is Praefector Valerius of the Imperial Army, serving under Commander Branne, my lord. We have a short window of evacuation, board as soon as you are able.'

Corax signalled to Agapito.

'Marshal the embarkation, get everybody on board and break for orbit.'

The Commander nodded and turned, growling orders over the comm-net to organise the Raven Guard retreat. With practised speed, the Raven Guard dispersed, the dropships launching in clouds of smoke and dust as soon as they were full. Corax watched them streaking back into the skies as shells and missiles fell once again on the Raven Guard's position. An explosion just to his left rocked him with its shockwave. A moment later, Aloni was at his side.

'Last transport, lord!'

Corax followed Aloni up the ramp, his boots ringing on the metal. As the ramp began to close, he looked out across the World Eaters army, baying like frustrated hounds.

'We survived, lord.' Aloni's tone conveyed his utter disbelief at the truth of this. 'Ninety-eight days!'

Corax felt no urge to celebrate. He looked at Aloni and the other Space Marines.

'I came to Isstvan with eighty thousand warriors. I leave with less than three thousand.'

His words hushed the jubilant mood and a sombre silence replaced it, the only sound that of the dropship's roar. Corax stood beside a viewing port, the deck rumbling beneath his feet, and looked at the hills of Urgall dropping away, picturing the thousands of fallen followers that he was leaving behind.

'What do we do now?' asked Agapito.

'We do what we have always done. We fall back, rebuild our strength and attack again. This is not the last the traitors will know of the Raven Guard. This is defeat but it is not the end. We will return.'

The cloud obscured his view, blanking it with whiteness, and he thought no more about the dead.

DEATH OF A SILVERSMITH

Graham McNeill

I am dying, that much I know. What I do not know is why. My throat has been crushed, and what little breath I can manage will not keep my brain functioning for long. He did not kill me outright, though he could have easily. I remember him looking down on me as my feet scrabbled at the floor of my workshop, gasping for air like a fish tossed onto a riverbank. He watched me as though fascinated by the transition of my body from life into death. But I am stronger than I look, and I was not going to die quickly.

But now that I think about it, perhaps that is what he wanted.

He did not even stay to watch me die, as though he had no interest in how long it took, only that it would be a drawn-out event. In fact, I think he used the precise amount of pressure needed to crush my larynx just enough to make my death slow. If I were not dying, I would almost admire the exacting attention to detail and controlled strength that such an act requires.

He wanted me dead, slowly, but did not care to watch the outcome.

What sort of a mind thinks like that?

I have no gods to pray to, no one does. The Emperor has shown us the folly of worshipping invisible deities whose existence is falsehood. The fanes and temples have all been torn down, even the last one across the silver bridge. The heavens are empty of supernatural agencies that might hear my dying thoughts, but right now I wish they were not.

Any witness to my death would be better than none. Otherwise it will be just a statistic, a report filed by the armsmen of this mighty vessel. Only if someone were to hear my last words or understand my last thoughts will they matter. I suspect that you would not forget a man dying in front of you.

Even though he killed me, I wish he had stayed to the end. At least then I would have had something to look at instead of the blackened ceiling of my workshop. The lumen globes maintain a steady glow, though I think they are fading.

Or is that me?

I wish he had stayed to watch me die.

He was so much bigger and stronger than me. Engineered, of course, but still, even before his genetic enhancements, I am sure he would have been more than a match for me. I have never been a violent man, the physical and martial pursuits never having interested me. From an early age, I was a tinkerer, a dismantler of working parts, and I possessed a fastidious mind that moved like

the most intricate clockwork. My father wanted to apprentice me to the Mechanicum of Mars, but my grandfather would not hear of it. The priests of the red planet had been the enemies of Terra two generations ago, and my grandfather, a lapidary with exquisitely long fingers who fashioned incredible bracelets and neck ornamentation in the style of Ascalon's Repoussé and chasing, still held grudges from that chaotic time.

Making weapons and war machines for the Imperium of Man was a waste of time for someone with the skills I possessed. My grandfather was an artisan in the true sense of the word, a craftsman worthy of the name, and the raw talent evident in his work had skipped my father and passed straight to me. Not that my father was ever jealous; far from it. He lauded my triumphs and proudly displayed my work, even from an early age when the brooches, earrings and glittering chokers I produced were, at first, amateurish and derivative. I worked for many years, learning my trade and developing my talent until it became clear that my ability now outstripped that of my grandfather. Crystallisation of his joints had turned his hands to claws, and it was a day of tears when at last he hung up his pliers and draw plate.

Work was never hard to come by, even though the last death spasms of the war still jerked and spat in the far reaches of Terra. The ethnarchs and despots had fallen one by one yet, even during times of strife, always there was a general's mistress who desired a fashionable necklace, a tetrarch in need of a more impressive sword hilt or a bureaucrat seeking to impress his peers with a filigreed quill.

As the wars drew to a close, and stability of a sort was restored to Terra, money began to flow around the globe in glittering golden rivers. And with it came the desire to spend copious sums commemorating Unity, lamenting the fallen or immortalising the future. I had never been so busy, and the frenetic demand drove my creativity to new heights of wonder.

I remember a particular piece I fashioned for the Lord General of the Anatolian Theatre. His soldiers had been lucky enough to fight alongside the warriors of the X Legion in one of their last battles on Terra. A rebellious branch of the Terawatt clans had thought to retain control of their Urals forges instead of turning them over to the Iron Hands, and had fought their mortal representatives.

Vengeance was swift in coming, and the forge complex fell after a month of heavy fighting, in which the Anatolian brigades bore the brunt of the strange and deadly weapons wielded by the blind clan-warriors. But, so the Lord General told me, the primarch of the X Legion had been so impressed by the courage of

his soldiers that he snapped the iron gauntlet from one of his Chapter's banners and presented it to the Noyan in command of the first brigade to breach the gates to the inner furnaces.

Needless to say, that particular commander never got to keep the finial, but dutifully passed it to his superior, and so on, until it reached the hands of the Lord General. Who in turn brought it to me, instructing me to create a worthy reliquary – though he laughed at the antiquated term – for the gift.

To work on so incredible a piece was an honour, and I lavished all my skill upon this particular commission. The gauntlet itself was clearly a trifling piece for the Iron Hands, but as I studied the intricacy and precision of the workmanship, I appreciated the incredible skill that had gone into its creation. I had heard of the miraculous hands of the great Ferrus Manus, but to think that I worked on a piece touched by a primarch himself, one of the Emperor's sons, gave me purpose and inspiration beyond my wildest dreams.

Day and night I worked, eschewing all human contact and turning away many wealthy patrons in the process. The brilliance of the gauntlet drove my passion and skill to new heights of invention and within the month I had created a wonder, a golden reliquary of such exquisite detail, delicate filigree and precious gems that it might have sat next to any ancient repository for the bones of one regarded as a saint, and not looked out of place.

Though the Emperor had forbidden the worship of false gods and unclean spirits, I had a number of old, mildewed books rescued from the ruins of a toppled fane by a friend in the Conservatory who knew of my interest in such things. Though their talk of gods and spirits and magic was clearly nonsense and lurid hyperbole, the artwork and symbolism inspired by such belief was extraordinary. Swirling lines, interconnecting weaves and spirals of such breathtaking complexity and perfect geometries that I could stare for hours at their beguiling patterns without losing interest.

In those books I found the perfect inspiration, and the finished piece was a thing of beauty.

The Lord General wept when he saw it, and I knew from our many meetings that he was not a man given to expressing his emotions. He embraced me and paid me twice the cost of the commission, and it took all my self-control not to hand the money back. Simply being allowed to work on such a piece was payment enough.

Word of the reliquary spread, and my talents became more in demand than ever, but nothing ever moved me to such creative heights as had my work on the

reliquary. Even so, my work was astonishing, and it was not long before it came to the attention of those who were shaping the future of this world and those beyond the star-sprayed heavens. On a wintry day, as I worked upon an onyx pommel stone wound in a globe of silver, the course of my life was changed forever.

A man, noble in bearing but unassuming in mien, entered my workshop in the foothills of the Sahyadri Mountains and politely awaited my attention. He spoke with a cultured voice in an accent I could not place, and told me that I was being offered a place within an unofficial artel he wished to establish. I smiled at his use of the old word, for none here now used it – too redolent of a long-dead tyrant. When I enquired who would form this artel, the man spoke of craftsmen, poets, dramatists and historians, men and women who would travel the stars with one of the Emperor's crusade fleets and bear witness to the greatest endeavour our species had ever known.

We were to show that such an organisation was necessary, to add weight to the growing chorus of voices urging a more formal and authoritative celebration of mankind's reunification. We would show what such an organisation could achieve. Our task would be no less vital than that of the warriors of the Expedition Fleet!

He saw my amusement, and smiled as I declined his offer. I was happy on Terra, and had no wish to venture into the unknown reaches of space. Pulling back his hood, he allowed long white hair to spill around his shoulders and told me that the very highest authority had requested my cooperation. I wanted to laugh in his face, but dared not as I saw a depth of understanding and a world of memory in his eyes. This man, this ordinary man with the weight of the world in his eyes, simply placed a cream envelope upon my workbench and told me to think carefully before I refused this offer.

He left without another word, leaving me alone with the envelope. It was many hours before I dared lift it, turning it over in my long fingers as though I might understand what lay within without opening it. To open it would indicate a tacit acceptance of his offer, and I had no wish to leave the comfort of my workshop. The flap was sealed with a blob of crimson wax, and my heart skipped a beat as I recognised the crossed lightning bolts and double-headed eagle.

But, as are all men of a creative bent, I was cursed with insatiable curiosity. I eventually opened the envelope, as my visitor had known I would, and read its contents. Though worded as a request, the words were so eloquent, so passionate

and so full of hope and power that I immediately knew who had written them. The stranger, whose identity I now knew, had not lied when he had told me the importance of the individual who requested my presence.

Within the day I had packed my meagre possessions and was on my way north to the mountains of the Himalazia to join the rest of my hastily assembled companions. I will not attempt to describe the immense majesty of the Palace, for words alone can do it no justice. It is landmass rendered in geological architecture, a wonder of the world that will never be surpassed. The artisan guilds strove to outdo one another in their efforts to glorify the Emperor's deeds, creating a monument worthy of the only being who could ever bear such an honorific without need of a true name.

Those early days are a blur to me now, though that may be because my brain is beginning to die from lack of oxygen. Suffice to say, I was soon travelling into the darkness of space, where shoal after shoal of starships thronged the heavens and greedily sucked fuel and supplies from the enormous continental plates locked in geostationary orbit.

At last I saw the vessel that would be my home for nearly two hundred years, a leviathan that shone in the reflected glow of the moon. It gleamed whitely as it spun gracefully to receive the flotilla of cutters and shuttles rising from the planet below. This was the *Vengeful Spirit*, flagship of Horus Lupercal and his Luna Wolves.

I quickly established myself on board, and though my possessions were meagre, my wealth was substantial, and my vanity only scarcely less so. All of which allowed me to extend my span and retain the appearance of youth with superlative juvenat treatments.

As I lie here on the floor of my workshop in the artisan decks of the *Vengeful Spirit*, I wish I had not bothered. What difference do a few less lines around the eyes and smoother skin make when every breath might be the last and a pleasing bliss enters my mind as portions of my brain begin to fade out?

I prospered on the flagship of the 63rd Expedition, creating many fine works and obtaining many commissions for embellished scabbards, honour markings, oaths of moment and the like. I made friends among the rest of my fellow remembrancers (as we came to be known after Ullanor): some good, some ill-chosen, but all interesting enough to make my time aboard ship extremely pleasurable. One fellow, Ignace Karkasy, wrote such hilariously irreverent poetry concerning the Legions that I fear he may one day wear out his welcome.

The work of the Expeditionary Fleet continued, and though many worlds were

made compliant by the work of warriors and iterators, I saw little of them save in the words and images of my fellows. I created a lapis lazuli recreation of the world map found in the depths of one uninhabited planet, and embossed many helmets with icons of fallen brothers after the war on Keylek.

Yet my greatest commission was to come in the wake of the Ullanor campaign.

From the accounts of those who had fought on that muddy, flame-lit world, it was a grand war, a towering victory that could have been won by no other warrior than Horus Lupercal. Ullanor marked a turning point in the crusade, and many were the war-leaders who came to my workshop, looking to celebrate their presence on that historic battlefield with an ornamented sword or cane.

The Emperor was returning to Terra, and a great Triumph was held in the ruins of the greenskin world to forever stamp that moment on the malleable alloy of history.

In the Emperor's absence, Horus Lupercal would lead the final stages of the crusade, and such a weighty duty required an equally weighty title.

Warmaster.

Even I, who had little taste for war or the tales of its waging, savoured the sound of that word in my mouth. It promised great things, glorious things, and my mind was awhirl with the magnificent works I might fashion to commemorate the honour the Emperor had bestowed upon Horus Lupercal.

As the Warmaster was anointed, so too were we accorded an honour. The founding of the Remembrancer Order is one of my proudest memories, one that made me weep when I heard of its ratification by the Council of Terra. I remembered the white-haired man who came to my workshop and raised many a glass to him in the liquor halls of the ship.

The day after the Triumph, a warrior came to me, a beautiful man encased in battle plate that gleamed white with lapping powder and smelled of scented oils. His name was Hastur Sejanus, and never have I been so captivated as I was by his countenance. He showed me his helm, cut with a crude marking just above the right eye. Without asking, I knew it was the crescent image of the new moon.

Sejanus bade me fashion four rings, each in silver, each set with a polished moonstone. One stone would bear the crescent moon of his own helmet, another the half moon, a third the gibbous and the fourth the full. For this work, I was to be paid handsomely, but I declined any remuneration, for I knew to whom these rings would be presented.

The Mournival.

Abaddon would bear the full moon, Aximand, called Little Horus by some, the half moon, and Torgaddon the gibbous. Sejanus would bear the final ring of the new moon.

It was honour enough to craft these things for warriors of such pedigree.

For weeks I laboured, shaping each ring with all the skill I possessed. I knew such warriors would despise frippery and over-ornamentation, so I kept my more elaborate design flourishes to a minimum until I was sure I had created rings worthy of the Warmaster's closest lieutenants.

With my work on the rings complete, I awaited the return of Hastur Sejanus, but the demands of war kept him from my workshop, and other commissions came across my workbench in due course. One such commission, simple enough in its conception, proved to be my undoing, coming also from a warrior of the Luna Wolves.

I never knew his name, for he never volunteered it, and I never dared ask. He was a blunt-faced man with a deep scar across his brow and a belligerent demeanour. He spoke with words accented with that particular harshness of Cthonia, so typical of the older warriors of the Luna Wolves.

What he wanted was simple, so simple it was almost beneath me.

From a pouch at his waist the warrior produced a silver disc, like the blank die of a coin, and placed it upon my workbench. He slid it towards me and told me that he wanted medals made, each bearing the image of a wolf's head and a crescent moon. Rarely do I take such specific commissions. I prefer to bring my own design sensibilities to each project, and told him so. The warrior was insistent to the point where I felt it would be dangerous to refuse. A wolf's head and a crescent moon. No more, no less. I was to craft the mould for such a medal, which he would then take to the engineering decks to have produced in greater numbers in a hydraulic press.

So banal a task did not interest me, but I nodded and told him a mould would be ready within the day for him. I did not miss the similarity in motif to that required by Hastur Sejanus, but said nothing. Words could only antagonise this warrior, for he had the air of one to whom casual, shocking violence was no stranger. To fear the Legiones Astartes was natural; they were, after all, bred to be killers, but this was something else, something more immediate than simply the recognition of his purpose in existing.

He left, and I immediately felt the air of my workshop become lighter, as though it had been pressing down on my skull. The animal part of me knew I had been in terrible danger, and screamed at me to flee, but my higher self could

find no reason for that fear. If only I had listened to my instinctual heart and fled, but where could I hide aboard this starship that one of the Warmaster's chosen would not find me?

I turned my attention to the silver, pushing aside all thoughts save those of working the metal. Such a simple task should have taken only a few hours, but I found I could not free myself from thoughts of the warrior and his threatening presence. Each carving lacked life and any spark of inspiration, so I turned to the same dusty books I had consulted when crafting the reliquary for the Lord General.

Within their pages, I found plentiful references to wolves and the moon: the Neuroi of ancient Scythia transforming into wolves once a year; the fear that the eyes of a she-wolf could bedazzle the senses of men. Some saw wolves as omens of victory, while others saw them as heralds of the world's last days. In the end, I found a fragmented tale of a chained wolf that broke its bonds and swallowed the sun before being slain by a one-eyed god. Given that my carven wolf was to be set against the moon, it seemed an apt choice.

With the design set in my mind's eye, I quickly sculpted the piece, rendering the wolf with simplicity and elegance. A noble creature, set proudly against a crescent moon, head tilted back as though about to loose a wild howl. Though the work was not difficult, and the design plain, I was, nevertheless, proud of it. I felt sure my nameless patron would be pleased with the final piece, and my fear of the violence that lurked at his core receded.

As promised, he returned the next day as the ship's bells sounded the beginning of the evening cycle. He demanded to see what I had created and smiled as I placed the silver carving on his absurdly huge palm. He turned it this way and that, letting the light catch the embossed image. At last he nodded to me and complimented my work.

I bowed my head, pleased my creation had met with his approval, but no sooner had I raised my gaze than his hand fastened upon my neck. Fingers like iron cables closed around my throat and I was lifted from my feet, kicking the air as I felt the inexorable pressure of his grip. I looked into his eyes, struggling to understand why he was doing this, but I could see nothing to explain his murderous attack.

I could not cry out, for his hand prevented anything other than a strangled wheeze escaping my mouth. Something cracked and I felt a tearing pressure inside me. Then I was falling, landing hard on the floor of the workshop and scrabbling my feet as I struggled for breath. Only tiny wisps of oxygen made it

through my ruined throat to my lungs, and I watched as he knelt beside me, with a sardonic expression on his blunt features.

Words struggled to reach my cyanotic lips, a thousand questions, but I had breath for only one.

‘Why?’

The warrior leaned down and whispered in my ear.

An answer of sorts, but one that made no sense.

I was dying. He could see that. Within minutes I would be dead, and without waiting to watch my last moments, the warrior turned and left my workshop.

I am stronger than I look, and though I cannot know for certain, I do not believe I am dying as swiftly as my killer might have imagined. I draw the thinnest of breaths, enough to sustain me for moments longer, but not enough to live. My sight grows dim, and I feel my body dying.

This silversmith is no more, and I fear no one will ever know why.

Yet, what is this?

Is that a draught of wind across my skin, the sound of a shutter door opening?

It is! I hear a cry of alarm, and heavy footsteps. Something huge and pale looms above me. Beautiful features swim before me, like the face of a rescuer viewed from beneath the waters of a still lake.

I know this warrior.

No finer figure in Mark IV plate.

Hastur Sejanus.

Even as he lifts me from the floor, I know he will not be able to save me. I will not survive, no matter how swiftly he brings me to the medicae, but I am sanguine. I will not die alone, someone will watch as I shuffle off this mortal coil. I will be remembered.

As he lays me upon my workbench, he is not careful of my possessions, and sweeps a tray of completed commissions aside. My head lolls to the side and I see four rings fall onto the floor. I watch him accidentally tread on one of them, flattening it completely beneath his bulk.

It is the ring I made for him.

He leans over me, his words urgent, and his grief at my passing is genuine.

Sejanus barks questions at me, but I can make little sense of them.

Life is slipping away. My eyes close, but before I am gone, I hear Sejanus ask his last questions.

‘Who did this? What did he say?’

With my last spark of life, I dredge the dying memories left to me and force

my killer’s last words up through my ruined larynx.

‘I can’t say.’

PRINCE OF CROWS

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The VIII Legion 'Night Lords'

Jago Sevatarion, 'Sevatar', First Captain, Commander of the Atramentar
Tal Vanek, Battle-brother, First Company
Orrin Valzen, Primus Medicae
Malithos Kuln, Ninth Captain
Naraka, 'the Bloodless', 13th Captain
Var Jahan, 27th Captain
Ophion, 39th Captain
Cel Herec, 43rd Captain
Krukesh 'the Pale', 103rd Captain
Tovac Tor, 'Lackhand', 114th Captain

The XIX Legion 'Raven Guard'

Alastor Rushal, 89th Captain

VIII Legion Personnel

Ekra Trez, Sin-Eater
Taye Karenna, Wing Commander, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron.
Kul Kyven, Naviseer, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron.
Vensent Aurlin, Gunner, 'Veiled Ones' Squadron.

PROLOGUE

‘Fall.’

The Knight-Lord of Caliban stood beneath the storm, a silver circlet crowning his brow, his ashen hair rain-painted against his pale features. The knight’s armour was a suit of black ceramite plating, engraved with sculpted lions forged from Martian red gold. Blood ran along the sword in his hands, sluicing away from the steel, rinsed by the downpour.

The other figure was an image cast in a cracked mirror. Where the Knight-Lord’s skin was pale, the other warrior’s flesh was a consumptive’s white, and his armour a midnight reflection of the storm above, crisscrossed with markings of jagged lightning.

The battle raged around them, above them, even beneath them as they waged war atop the piled bodies of their sons, wounded and dead alike. The Knight-Lord of Caliban had waited months for this moment. Now it had come, in the shrieking wind and howling rain, punctuated by the staccato cracks of thousands and thousands of bolters.

The knight stepped back, his duty done, the final smears of blood rain-washed from his sword. His brother staggered, clawed hands clasping his own neck. A dark, liquid torrent was gushing between his grasping fingers. He was trying to hold his throat closed, and he was failing.

‘Fall,’ the Knight-Lord said to his brother. His voice was broken, ragged, breathless. *‘Fall.’*

The other warrior’s black eyes were wide, trembling as his life flooded through his hands. He spoke without sound, lips working worthlessly, and finally fell to one knee. The wounds in his stomach and chest bled as fiercely as the cut throat. His body, systematically shredded and torn by the kingly blade, seemed to be held together by desperate hate alone.

The Knight-Lord wasn’t a soul given to smiling, nor was he petty enough to mock a fallen foe. He lifted his blade in salute, crosspiece resting against his crowned forehead, honouring a slain enemy.

‘I told you,’ the Lion said to his dying brother, ‘I would be the end of you, Curze.’

PART I

THE KYROPTERA

CHAPTER I

Fraternity in Shadow

The brothers always met in darkness. Their penchant for convening in a lightless chamber wasn't for the theatrics of symbolism, nor from a need for secrecy. Some traditions simply existed unchanged from their genesis, born of habit rather than artifice. Once, the darkness had mattered. Now, it simply was.

Red eye-lenses cut through the gloom, accompanied by the grinding purrs of joint servos and active power cables. Mark IV armour wasn't a silent invention, by any means. It was even louder when it was damaged.

The three brothers stood in silence. Defeat cloaked their shoulders, clinging closer than the shadows in which they stood. Their shame was fresh enough that none of them had even repaired the damage to their armour. Occasional sparks from ruptured joints cast flares of light across the chamber, while the air slowly ripened with the scent of battle emanating from their broken suits of ceramite. The chemical stench of fyceline clashed with the crude tang of promethium. Behind it all was the grey scent of gunsmoke, insipidly close to charcoal.

'Three of us,' said one of the brothers. 'Three of us survived.'

'There may yet be more,' said another.

The first scoffed at the notion. 'There won't be any more. Have you been blind for the last nine hours? Did you not see what just happened? How many ships did we lose?'

The third brother leaned on the edge of the central table, his crested helm tilting to regard his kindred in turn.

'We cannot know. Not until the fleet masses again. I saw the *Praxis Mundi* break apart and take out seven of her escorts. The *Lady Sapienta* died before her. The *Aeternum Dread*. The *Throneless King*. The *Obfuscate*. Those are merely the cruisers I saw die. I cannot speak of how many frigates and destroyers. Too many to name.'

'What of the *Nightfall*?'

The third brother shook his head. 'Aflame within and breached without. The

flagship cannot have escaped. The Dark Angels went for her throat as viciously as the Lion went for Lord Curze's.' He paused for a moment, taking a slow breath. 'The *Nightfall* should have been the first ship to run. I can't comprehend why she stayed. What profit was there in trading firepower with the Dark Angels fleet?'

'I heard the vox-reports,' said the first brother. 'Sevatar ordered the flagship to remain in-system, while he recovered companies from the surface whose vessels had already fled.'

The third snorted. 'How very *noble.* So he killed himself and lost the flagship. Mark my words – no longer will the name Sevatar be celebrated among our ranks. How did the Angels arrange this? The ambush… the coordination was beyond anything I've seen.'

'Does that even matter?' the first replied. 'Unless we strike back with overwhelming force, we've just lost the Thramas Crusade.'

'The Legion must regroup at the fallback junctures,' agreed the second. 'We can recommence hostilities once we have our bearings, and the logistics are codified.'

'Aye,' said the first. 'There speaks wisdom. It might be weeks, it might be months, but we are far from finished.'

The third brother called up a tactical display, but the flickering hololithic image stuttered and died before showing anything of worth. The ship had taken severe damage in its flight; many of its systems were still struggling to realign.

'We face two problems – both bladed, both unkind. First, we must disseminate word of the defeat to all Legion forces in the rest of the sector via our astropathic choirs, so our brothers don't run headlong into the ambush site we just fled. That will require a wealth of good fortune to work.'

'And the other problem?'

The third brother hesitated before answering. 'We must do that which only one Legion has ever had to do. We must choose who commands the remaining forces, with our primarch fallen.'

'Fallen doesn't mean *dead*, brother. Have you received word from the apothecarion?'

'I have, and it doesn't bode well. Who among the Legion has ever treated a wounded primarch before? We're working blind. The wounds have closed, though not cleanly. Blood loss is severe. Cranial damage and oxygen starvation are still both potentially terminal, or crippling. Haemorrhaging is rampant. Organs I cannot even name are lacerated and severed from vein networks we've

never seen before. If he were human – if he were even one of us – a single one of his wounds would be enough to see him dead. He's sustained eleven such lethalities.'

The proclamation hung in the air. None of the brothers wished to add to it.

'I saw it happen,' admitted the second. 'Even recovering him cost us too many lives. I surrendered most of a company in forcing the Lord of the First Legion back. I regret giving that order, I assure you.'

The others nodded. 'The truth is cold, but we must face it: the three of us lead the Legion now.'

They tasted that truth in a moment of silence, interrupted by the communication feed from the command deck opening in a storm of crackles.

'My lords,' said the human captain. 'Another four vessels have reached the edge of the system.'

'Name them,' said the first brother.

'Auspex coding registers them as the *Quintus*, *Dusk's Daughter*, the *Covenant of Blood*, and… and the *Nightfall*.'

The war room's bulkhead door opened on grinding tracks, admitting the emergency red lighting of the corridor beyond. The figure in the doorway wore a helm to match his three kindred, with its crest of backswept gargoyle wings and skull-painted faceplate. Tourmaline eye-lenses stared at the three warlords gathered in the dark.

He'd come alone, but he'd come armed. A spear rested on his shoulder guard, ending in a deactivated chainblade with several rows of jagged, chipped teeth.

'I hope you'll forgive me for being late. There was an ambush. You may have noticed it. Not all of us could just light up our engines and run for the deepest black.'

He walked into the chamber, taking a place at the central table.

'It is good to see you, Sevatar.'

'I'm sure it is.' Sevatar glanced at the tactical hololith drifting in the air above the table, showing a spread of several VIII Legion vessels in the deep void. 'So this is defeat. Now we know how the Raven Guard and Salamanders felt.'

'We've mustered close to one-twentieth of the fleet's strength here. We must reform as best we are able in the weeks that follow, and face the facts. We are wounded, but not dead. The Thramas Crusade cannot end here.'

Sevatar said nothing at first. After several moments, during which he realised they weren't making some foolish jest, he looked at them in turn.

‘The three of you did well to evacuate the primarch. Have you had any contact with the rest of the Kyroptera?’

‘Only to confirm deaths of Jexad, Shoma and Ithillion,’ the second brother replied. ‘We are all that remains of the Kyroptera now.’

‘So three of the seven are dead,’ Sevatar mused aloud, ‘and the primarch is wounded.’

‘The primarch is dying,’ corrected the second brother. ‘We lead the Legion now.’

‘We’ll see. Either way, the future is grim.’ Sevatar dropped his halberd onto the table, ignoring the resonant clang of metal on metal. ‘This won’t do at all. Of the seven, you three are the ones I like least.’

‘Please be serious, brother.’

Sevatar had a certain way of smiling. Amusement brightened his black eyes first, before tugging at the corners of his lips in soft twitches. It was the smile of a corpse with hooks pulling at its cheeks, or a soul that didn’t really understand humour in the same way as those around him – thus he had to feign it to the best of his limited ability.

Sevatar smiled. ‘Am I to assume you brave creatures have devised a plan?’

‘We have,’ replied the first brother. ‘Once the fleet’s strength is rebuilt, we will strike back. The question is where.’

Sevatar tilted his head. ‘That’s your plan?’

‘It is.’

The First Captain cleared his throat. This moment required a degree of subtlety. ‘Already,’ he said, ‘you are trying to take us down a path we shouldn’t walk. You speak of retribution, of counter-attacking a foe that has proven they can outmanoeuvre us.’

The others hesitated. ‘Of course. What else would we do?’

‘We could fight a war we actually have a chance to win instead,’ Sevatar replied.

‘Run?’ asked another. ‘We have a duty to keep the First Legion engaged here.’

Sevatar raised an eyebrow, though the expression remained hidden behind his faceplate. ‘At the cost of the Legion? You wish to whore our lives away to slake your frustrated bloodlust at being beaten. There is nothing noble in that, brothers. I won’t let you take the Legion to the grave because you can’t admit we lost.’

‘The primarch would wish us to fight this battle to the end.’

‘He would indeed, but you said the primarch is dying. If so, his wishes mean

nothing at all.’

‘The Dark Angels are our equals, not our betters,’ one of the brothers stressed. ‘We can win the Crusade with the right counter-attack.’

‘So you say, Malithos,’ Sevatar replied with the same mild, unpleasant smile. ‘It sounds to me as though you’d cripple us all in a bid to soothe the Legion’s bruised ego.’

Malithos, Captain of the Ninth Company, growled through his crested helm’s vox-grille. ‘If Lord Curze dies, your reign as his precious favourite ends this very night.’

Sevatar was still smiling. They could hear it in his voice. ‘Don’t threaten me, Ninth Captain. It will not end well for you.’

‘Brothers, be at peace,’ said the second of them. ‘Sevatar, you are right; we must beware of wounded pride forcing us into foolish action. And Malithos, you are right; we have to strike back, for duty and pleasure in equal measure. But we must not be at odds. The moment is too grave.’

‘I appreciate your conciliatory efforts, Var Jahan.’ Sevatar’s voice was calm, devoid of the usual baiting edge. ‘But the Lion’s forces just broke the Legion’s back in a single strike. The entire fleet is scattered. We lost dozens of ships; both our own and those of the humans that follow us. The last I saw of the Legio Ulricon’s flagship was its wreckage, spilling into the void after the kiss of Dark Angels guns. How many Titans died in that wreck alone? How many tens of thousands of trained crew?’

‘We will regroup,’ said Malithos. ‘It is our duty. The war hasn’t ended just because you’ve become craven.’

‘Craven,’ Sevatar replied. ‘A strange word to use when describing the one who remained behind to help the slower ships evacuate.’

‘But duty *demands* we fight,’ said Var Jahan, Captain of the 27th. ‘Death is nothing compared to vindication.’

Sevatar grinned at that. ‘Such pretty words. I wonder if they’ll echo into eternity as wisdom or foolishness. Whichever Fate decides, you will not have me at your side. Some of my sub-captains already speak of sailing to Terra, or rejoining the Warmaster’s fleet. Others wish to break apart to venture elsewhere, harrying Imperial supply lines. I am inclined to grant them their request, rather than send them to die with you.’

‘The Kyroptera will vote,’ said Malithos.

Sevatar gave a sneering snort. ‘Voting. How very democratic. Since when have we needed to vote on anything?’

‘Since you returned to us,’ said the last brother, Cel Herec, Captain of the 43rd, ‘and the Kyroptera ceased to speak with one voice. United we stand, Sevatar. Divided we fall.’

‘So many pretty words tonight, yet they all miss the point. The Legion is better suited to the shadows until we are ready to strike in force. *Then* we butcher. *Then* we taste their blood. The Angels just taught us a stern lesson in the foolishness of gathering together in one place, and trying to engage in a fair fight.’

Sevatar leaned on a support pillar, crossing his arms over his chestplate as he continued. ‘I’ll be absolutely clear, since you are all so reluctant to take the hint. I *will not let you* take the Legion back into this war, after such a crippling defeat. That’s all there is to it. I will take the Atramentar, along with any other companies that choose to stand with me, and rejoin the Warmaster’s fleet. There is nothing more we can do here – and I say that delaying the Dark Angels for almost three years is more than long enough. I am finished with the Thramas Crusade. I am taking my companies to Terra. I plan to see the real war before the final day dawns. The rest of the Legion should come with me. I may lose my temper if you try to keep fighting this meaningless war.’

Malithos looked at his brother in raw disbelief for a moment. ‘Are you mad, Sevatar?’

‘I don’t think so. I feel fine.’

‘How would you stop us from staying?’ asked Var Jahan.

‘I’d kill you, of course. But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Emotions are running high, and my spear is all the way over there.’ He gestured to where it lay on the table.

‘Brother, if you’re finished acting the fool, may we focus on the matters at hand?’

‘Focus on them all you like. I’m going to see the primarch with my own eyes, rather than rely on your prattling about his demise.’ Sevatar moved away from the pillar, heading for the sealed bulkhead.

‘Your spear, Sevatar.’

‘I will be back for it soon enough. Enjoy your discussion, brothers.’

He walked from the chamber, his silhouette filling the entryway for a moment before he turned the corner. The door rumbled closed.

Malithos shook his head. ‘I grow weary of him,’ he said to the others.

‘Many of us do,’ Cel Herec replied. ‘When we rebuild the Kyroptera, we would be better served if Sevatar found himself unable to rejoin.’

Malithos sneered, as only he could do. ‘Why the spineless turn of phrase? Just

say the truth. I'll kill him myself, when the time comes.'

Var Jahan scarcely listened to their words. His attention lingered on Sevatar's spear, resting on the table. The blade was a monstrous glaive; the haft a solid length of black iron and ridged ceramite; the rear butted by a brutal spike, with a crystalline power generator above. Every warrior within the Eighteen Legions knew of that blade. What far fewer knew was the nature of the haft's secondary generator. Having fought at Sevatar's side many times, Var Jahan knew its purpose very well indeed.

Ultimately, Var Jahan trusted none of his brothers, least of all those in the Kyroptera. When his teeth began to itch with the onset of displacing air pressure, he was the only one of the three captains not surprised.

He was also the only one running for the door.

The assassins appeared in a storm of white noise and aetheric mist. As the captains recoiled, raising futile hands to ward off the blinding light, all three knew just what that thunder heralded. Malithos and Cel Herec reached for their weapons, which was why they died. Var Jahan never stopped running.

The Atramentar manifested across the chamber, wreathed in the greasy after-smoke of teleportation flare, their bolters already raised.

'We have come for you,' the first of the Terminators growled before their guns opened up in a unified cascade.

Var Jahan heard his brothers die, heard their cries and gurgles across the vox, over the pounding of his boots and both hearts. Bolts took him high in the back and low in the left leg, sending him into a stumble, falling down onto a deck being riven by detonating shells. He rolled across the decking, never ceasing, and threw himself through the automated bulkhead.

In the corridor beyond, 27th Captain Var Jahan lay panting on the decking. He looked up at Sevatar. The First Captain stood with his back to the wall, arms crossed over his breastplate, looking down in idle curiosity.

'Hello, captain,' said Sevatar.

Var Jahan was rising when the doors opened again, releasing gunsmoke into the corridor. A squad of Atramentar Terminators stood in their hulking war plate, immense bolters aimed at the prey that had fled them.

'Stand down,' Sevatar said, and offered a hand to help his brother up. 'This one was intelligent enough to sense my intent. He gets to live.'

Var Jahan almost spat. 'Most generous of you.'

Sevatar chuckled before replying. 'I thought so, too.'

‘Why did you kill them?’ Var Jahan moved so his back wasn’t facing the Atramentar. ‘Why did you want us dead? Fratricide, brother… Has it really come to this?’

‘We came to this the moment you three fools decided it was best to kill the Legion simply to expunge some imaginary stain on our imaginary honour.’

‘But the preparation…’

‘I had a feeling the Kyroptera would need reorganising. I was right.’

‘You killed them because they disagreed with you. Sevatar, you are insane.’

The First Captain gave a subtle shrug. ‘So I am often told. What matters is that the Legion needs the Kyroptera now more than ever, and we will not lead our brethren back onto the Dark Angels’ blades.’

‘But the Warmaster…’

Sevatar’s hand was at his throat before the sentence could end. The First Captain lifted him, slamming him back against the wall.

‘Do I look like I care what the Warmaster wants of me?’ Sevatar’s skullish faceplate stared with its red eye-lenses. ‘We never cared what the Emperor wanted of us. Why should we waste our lives out here in the back end of the galaxy, dancing to the Warmaster’s tune?’ He released Var Jahan, walking back into the chamber. ‘He has leashed us for three years. I am done with obedience. To the abyss with Horus and his arrogant whims. He is no better than the Emperor.’

Var Jahan followed his brother. He had to step over Cel Herec’s smoking corpse, sparing it barely a glance. Malithos had died in similar indignity; the Ninth Captain’s body was half-draped across the central table, blood pooling across the surface in a spreading lake.

‘True independence, then? Our allies in the other Legions are simply alliances of convenience?’

‘Better that than living shackled to a sickened, dying Imperium.’ Sevatar’s voice was softer now, more distant. ‘Var Jahan. Forgive my display of anger.’ He recovered his spear, and rested it on his shoulder guard. ‘I am going to see our father.’

As the bootsteps faded, Var Jahan looked to the towering forms of the Night Lords Terminators. They offered no hint of their emotions or thoughts, staring impassively through the scarlet eye-lenses of their brutish war-helms.

‘I know you all,’ Var Jahan said to them. ‘By name and reputation, even if I’ve not served with all of you. Thorion, Malek, Jakresh…’ he listed their names one by one, nodding to them each in turn. ‘What did Sevatar offer you, to make such

loyal warriors? What is it he holds over you that makes you serve him even through the spilled blood of our Legion-kin?'

Thorion, commander of the Atramentar, shook his head as coils of teleportation mist started forming around their dark armour.

'He gives us the truth.'

Their departure was as sudden and loud as their arrival, leaving Var Jahan alone with the bodies of his brothers.

CHAPTER II

Lair

The last time Sevatar wept had been as a boy, on the edge of becoming a man. After that night over a century ago, the boy he'd been never grew to manhood. Instead, he became a weapon, growing into a life with neither the need for emotion nor the time for tears.

Even seeing his gene-father in the apothecarion didn't move him to sorrow. He wasn't sure why. And yet he could hear seasoned warriors – murderers and flayers and torturers all – praying and weeping across the Legion's mass-relay vox-network. The Luna Wolves had sounded the same, when Horus was wounded. Sevatar hadn't understood it then, and he didn't understand it now. The easy expression of emotion was just something that happened to other people.

Curze lay on the surgical slab, tended by bloodstained Legion Apothecaries and the insectile arms of semi-automated medicae tenders attached to the ceiling. The press of bodies prevented a clear look, but Sevatar wasn't optimistic. He'd caught a glance at the primarch's severed throat, the flesh knitted in ragged cohesion, while the entire chamber reeked of spilled blood. There was something raw and primal in the scent, something beyond the coppery smell of human life. The Emperor alone knew what the primarchs really were. Sevatar had no inclination to waste time guessing.

But if the primarch died…

The thought ended there. He couldn't carry it any further. To try was no different from imagining a colour never before conceived, or recalling a song never before heard. His mind rebelled at the very effort.

How did a Legion function without its guiding hand? Without its lord, mentor, and genetic sire? *Father* was too trite a word when dealing with such concepts. *Father* implied mortality. Fathers died.

Sevatar remembered Isstvan all too well. Although he spent much of that miserable massacre grinding through warriors of the Raven Guard, he'd been

blade to blade with the Iron Hands when Lord Manus, their primarch, fell. He'd seen the psychic echo rip through them. Subtle in some, ravaging in others – every single warrior in the black of the X Legion had reacted with a fury suddenly unrestrained. All hesitation cast aside, all notion of a defensive battle forgotten.

Sevatar still carried scars from that battle. He could've had them sealed and healed by augmetic surgery or synthetic skin grafts, but he preferred to keep them as they were. They were some of the few things he wholly owned himself, in an existence of slavery to gene-wrought gods of war.

He looked down at his gauntleted hands, weaponless and painted crimson. Months ago, he'd told the Dark Angels the truth: that to bear hands of sinners' red was a gangland custom from Nostramo, forced upon those who failed their families. The fate of traitors and fools, carried into the VIII Legion as it conquered the stars. The Ultramarines had taken that tradition, as they took so much from the other Legions. It was less severe, less grave among the warriors of Ultramar – to them, a helm of red merely meant censure. To the sons of Nostramo, the crimson hands were a death sentence. The mark of the condemned.

Sevatar had earned his red hands on Isstvan V, for failures too great to forgive. Even the memory made him smile with an actual edge of sincerity, as so few things ever did. He lived life on borrowed time, every night a gift from the primarch until Lord Curze chose the hour of his execution.

The wet rasp of laboured breathing drew his attention, though he didn't need to look up. He smelled the man's wax-candle scent, the musk of fine parchment and old, old blood pushed through weak veins by a slow heart. The newcomer reeked of *age*, and therefore, of weakness.

Sevatar shuddered.

'Trez,' he greeted the archivist. The old man nodded in reply, wheezing into a rebreather mask. 'When did you come over from the *Nightfall*?'

'I just arrived, Jago. I came to get you. Please come back to the flagship with me. I have something to show you, and we have something to discuss.'

The doors rolled open, freeing the smell of an open grave. Trez entered, still heaving shallow exhalations into his rebreather. Sevatar followed, his boots thudding on the decking, echoing off the arched walls.

Trez ignored the bodies hanging on chains. Sevatar didn't. Rare were the moments he entered his primarch's inner sanctum, and despite everything he'd

seen and done in over a century of serving in the Great Crusade, Curze's private chamber always made his skin crawl. Here he saw the madness within his father's mind, pushed out to infect the surrounding world. A psyche's truths, written in skinned bodies and desecrated remains.

Trez sucked in a ragged breath. Moisture droplets gathered in the transparent oxygen mask he wore, dewing before his thin lips.

'He talks to them.'

'Talks to who?'

Trez gestured to the bodies. 'Them.'

Sevatar reached out to one of the hanging corpses, giving its scourged, naked torso a gentle shove. The body rocked back and forth on its chains. Something dark and wet trickled from its open mouth, spattering onto the floor.

'Delightful,' the Night Lord said. He turned back to the archivist. 'What do you want of me, little man? I have a Legion to piece back together.'

Trez brought his old bones over to a chair by a wooden desk, sized accordingly for a human. With no evidence of impatience, he started leafing through parchments, the papers fluttering softly in his arthritic hands.

'You have never understood the man you serve,' he said without looking up from his work. 'None of his warriors ever have. Does that not seem like a risible flaw to you, Jago?'

Jago, thought the captain. *That's twice now.*

'My name is Sevatar.'

'Indeed.' Trez smoothed his thinning white hair back from his cratered features, arranging a piece of parchment on the desk, until it was placed just so. He read the words from the cream-coloured paper, between rebreather wheezes. 'Jago Sevatarion, born in City's Edge. First Captain of the Eighth Legion, Commander of the Atramentar, officer of the Kyroptera; known also by the names Sevatar the Condemned, and…' Trez snorted, shaking his head, '…and by the rather amusing title, *Prince of Crows*.'

Sevatar removed his helm with a snap-hiss of air pressure venting from unlocked collar seals. He breathed in the chamber's abattoir smell, his expression thoughtful.

'I'm not sure I like your tone. The last man to sneer at me like that soon wished he hadn't, little archivist.'

'Oh?' Trez looked up, curiosity writ plain across his weathered visage. 'And who might that have been?'

'I don't recall his name.'

‘I was given to understand all warriors of the Legiones Astartes were gifted with eidetic recall. A hololithic memory, if you will.’

‘We are,’ Sevatar admitted. ‘I just never asked his name. I was rather preoccupied skinning him alive at the time. Now tell me what you want of me, Trez. I doubt you’ve mistaken me for someone famed for the virtue of patience.’

The old man’s grin showed a blunt arsenal of age-darkened teeth. ‘You will need patience if you wish to lead this Legion.’

Sevatar laughed, drawing the spicy, meaty scent of unrefrigerated cadavers into his lungs. ‘Even you are sure Lord Curze will die? Even you, his devoted little ape-creature, have given him up as dead? Whatever will you do once you can no longer eat the mud from our master’s boots, Trez? It would grieve me to see you starve to death.’

The archivist went back his parchments, still smiling into his rebreather. ‘I know your secret, Jago.’

‘I have no secrets.’

Trez ran his fingertips over the Nostraman lettering, his fingers following the flow of inked words. ‘He told me, Jago. He tells me everything.’

Sevatar tilted his head, black eyes unblinking. ‘I have no secrets,’ he said again.

‘Then why do you hide from slumber, First Captain? Why do you force yourself to remain awake for weeks on end? Why – if you have no secrets – do you wake up with cold blood flowing through your pounding heart on the rare nights you surrender to sleep?’

Sevatar’s smile was as cold, and just as motionless, as the peeled-back rictus grins showing on the face of every chained corpse in the chamber. He said a single word, neither consciously weighted with threat, nor invested with any emotion at all. Just a single word, scarcely above a whisper, breathed through a dead man’s smile.

‘Careful.’

Trez had to look away. The tremble in his hands couldn’t entirely be blamed on arthritis, this time.

‘Sevatar…’ he said.

‘Ah, so *now* I’m Sevatar. *Now*, once you’ve pushed me to the point of losing my temper, you decide to show me an iota of respect.’ The captain stalked closer, his armour joints thrumming. Up close, the rumble of active power armour made Trez’s gums itch. Sevatar crouched by the seated old man, his black eyes forming pits in his pale face as he stared. ‘What has he told you, Trez? What did

my father share with his little eater of dreams?'

The old man forced the words through quivering lips. 'The truth.'

The First Captain's grin returned – a liar's smile, never reaching his dark eyes. 'You think I won't kill you, right here, right now?'

'The primarch…'

'The primarch lies dying aboard another ship. Even if he walked in here this very moment, do you think I care? You disgust me, old man.' The Night Lord cupped the elder's jaw in his gauntleted fingers. A single twist, a soft squeeze, and the archivist's skull would shatter in the warrior's grip. 'The stink of your slow blood and worn skin… The fading rhythm of the ancient heart in your chest… And now, the spill of such dangerous words from these careless lips.' Sevatar released the old man's head. 'You make it easy to hate you, Trez.'

'I can help you. That's why I wanted to speak with you. I can help you.'

Sevatar rose to his feet, already reaching for his helmet as he walked away. 'I don't need your help.'

Trez cleared his throat, his voice husked by doubt. 'It isn't working any more, is it? The training. The meditation. You can't hold the pain inside the way you once could.'

He didn't even look back. 'You know nothing, human.'

'You're lying, Jago.'

Sevatar masked his white face beneath the skullish helm. Chiropteran wings rose from the helmet in a feral crest, cast in dark iron. His voice was a vox-altered snarl.

'I am a son of the sunless world, and Eighth Legion to my core. Of course I'm lying, Trez. It's what we do.'

CHAPTER III

Preparation

The pain came in a teasing touch, rolling against the back of his eyes in a throbbing tide. Just when he'd crest the dull ache and dare to hope it was receding for good this time, it pressed back with unwelcome insistence.

Sevatar wiped his dry, tired eyes with a thumb and fingertip. He didn't need his helm's retinal display to tell him he'd not slept in two weeks. He felt every hour of it.

'Captain?' asked a female voice.

He looked up from the hololithic tactical display playing out before his eyes, seeing a dark-haired woman in a rumpled flight-suit, carrying her visored helm under one arm. As he looked over at her, the sounds of the bridge came flooding back, breaking what remained of his fragile focus. He did his best to ignore the whispers, mutters, rattles and clanks of three hundred souls doing their duty.

'Speak, Wing Commander Karenna.'

'With respect, sir… you look like shit.'

'That doesn't sound like speaking *with respect* to me. What do you want, Taye?'

'I have bad news, sir.'

Sevatar didn't have to fake his smile. Bad news was one of the few things that never failed to amuse him.

'Of course you do.'

'The *Blade in the Black* just jumped in-system. Commodore Yul is aboard, alive and well.'

'That makes him the new fleet admiral. Offer him my insincere congratulations on a rank he earned purely by being the last naval officer standing. But what's the bad news?'

'He voxed to inform me that Wing Commander Verith died in the ambush. The Void Condors were lost to a man. Do you want me to allocate the *Blade* a fighter squadron from one of the other ships?'

He waved the question away. ‘Ask the new admiral, that’s his game to play. My only order is that you and the Veiled Ones are to remain aboard the *Nightfall*.’

Karenna saluted in VIII Legion tradition, her hand in a loose claw, fingers touching her chest, above her heart – a sign of submission, offering the heart itself to a commander. Another gang custom, weaving its way down the years. On Nostramo, it had always meant a much more literal and visceral offer: to promise something so sincerely, the speaker would have their heart cut from their chest if they were found to be lying or incompetent.

‘Your trust in me and my men is very gratifying, captain.’

Sevatar was already looking back at the hololithic display, watching the simulation of viable warp routes out of the system.

‘Go away, Taye.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Watching her walk away, Sevatar finally abandoned the tactical projections.

‘You,’ he addressed a nearby servitor.

‘Yes,’ came its dead-voiced reply. The thing’s bionic eyes didn’t seem to focus on anything at all.

‘Record these projected flight paths. Disseminate them to the rest of the fleet.’

‘Compliance,’ said the slack-mouthed slave. Its amputated fingers ended in stubs, each one a key to be plugged into standardised Imperial terminals. The servitor unblinkingly slid its severed digits into the connection port with five separate tiny clicks.

Sevatar turned back to the primarch’s empty command throne. Before the ambush, Fleet Admiral Torun Keshr had occupied the place next to it, forever standing in calm control. Sevatar had never seen the man fazed, not even when he lay dying under wreckage, as the bridge burned around him.

‘Help me up, please,’ the old officer had said. Sevatar hadn’t even tried. The man’s legs were gone. The First Captain couldn’t see them through the smoke, not that it would’ve made a second’s difference if he could.

Sevatar pulled himself back to the present.

‘Summon Captains Ophion, Var Jahan, Krukesh, Tovac Tor, Naraka, and Alastor Rushal to the *Nightfall*,’ he said, uncaring of which officer carried out the order. ‘I will be in the primarch’s chambers, waiting for them.’

He walked from the strategium without another word.

‘Jago,’ the old man greeted him, as the bulkhead doors rolled open.

In a moment of rare expression beyond a false smile, Sevatar looked genuinely confused. One eye narrowed in disbelief as he stared at the hunched old man at the desk, surrounded by decaying bodies hanging from the ceiling on rust-spoiled meathooks.

‘Do you ever leave these quarters?’

‘Rarely,’ Trez admitted. Sevatar’s arrival had distracted him from his writing. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘No more than usual. My brothers are gathering here this eve, little man. Be somewhere else.’

Trez repressed a shiver, wheezing into his rebreather. ‘Where should I go?’

‘An intriguing question. The answer is that I don’t care. Go anywhere that isn’t here.’

‘But Jago…’

Sevatar turned very, very slowly. Even helmetless, the joints in his armour’s neck purred unpleasantly as he turned his head to face the archivist.

‘Call me that,’ he said, ‘one more time.’

Trez looked at the First Captain of the VIII Legion, standing amidst an abattoir of hanging corpses, his face so unhealthily pale he might easily be hung on a flesh-hook himself. The chainglaive resting on one armoured shoulder was taller than the warrior who carried it.

‘Sevatar,’ Trez amended, quietly.

‘Better. Shouldn’t you be aboard the *Excoriator*, watching over the primarch’s dreams?’

‘Not now,’ replied the old man. ‘He isn’t dreaming as you would understand it. There’s nothing behind his closed eyes, nothing but the absolute dark.’

‘Fascinating. If you’re so devoted to staying, then at least keep quiet.’

‘I will. Thank you, Sevatar.’

Sevatar grunted an acknowledgement, and walked through the hanging corpses to where Trez worked at the primarch’s immense round table. The very edge of one side was taken up by the archivist’s parchments and data-slates. The rest of the circular slab played home to a mouldering cadaver. It looked like it had been pulled apart by a surgeon using no tools, nothing more than his bare hands. Gobbets of blackening meat were stuck to the table’s surface, cemented there by dried blood and bodily fluids.

Sevatar shook his head, reaching out to shove the corpse aside.

‘Don’t,’ Trez said. ‘Don’t, Sevatar.’

‘Why not?’ The warrior’s hand froze above the violated torso.

‘Lord Curze talks to them.’

‘So you said.’

‘No.’ Trez cleared his throat, though his voice still stayed phlegm-wet. ‘I mean, he speaks to them as they are. He knows when they’ve been moved, and it enrages him.’

Sevatar grabbed the body by its exposed spine and hauled it off the table. It lay sprawled on the decking after a dull thump.

‘We will deal with the primarch’s madness when he returns to us. *If* he returns to us.’ The captain keyed in a code on the interface now revealed, fingers tapping buttons crusted with gems of dry blood. Labouring hololithic generators flickered to life, beaming an image of the last display shown: the dead world of Tsagualsa, surrounded by its dense asteroid field.

Sevatar blanked the image, and called up a local void-scry. The fleet resolved, though blood on two of the projector modules stained parts of the hololith in swathes of red.

‘He wasn’t always this way.’

Trez looked up from his work again. ‘Pardon me?’

Sevatar hadn’t realised he’d spoken aloud. ‘The primarch. He wasn’t always this way. He had a vision of how best to bring worlds to compliance, and it was a vision we followed willingly. Now look at what he’s become. His private quarters are a reflection of the madness within. His own mind is eating him alive.’

Trez said nothing.

‘No comment, old man? No cunning retort, or words of wisdom? Are you not the being closest to our lord in all the great and grand galaxy?’

The archivist swallowed, breathing slowly into his rebreather. ‘He walks the same path as the rest of you, Sevatar. He is merely closer to the end of it. You’ll all be like him, one night.’

‘Not I. And don’t speak of him like he’s damned. There’s still nobility in him. Still strength.’

‘Oh, I know that.’ Trez gestured to the bodies. ‘He is not always this bad. He had a… difficult few months, before the ambush. His dreams were bleak, poisoned by doubt. He knows when and how he’ll die, Sevatar. He’s always known. The knowledge pains him more than you or I could ever understand. The pressure of it, the inevitability, is a tide against his consciousness.’

Sevatar shook his head. ‘He told me the same thing once. Did he tell you when he believed the time would come?’

‘Yes, he did.’

Sevatar concealed his shock easily enough, though he’d not been expecting the primarch to ever share such a thing. ‘And is that time now?’

‘No.’

‘Then why is there still worry in your cataracted eyes, old man? If it is true, why has he suffered in this coma for two weeks, on the edge of death? If he’s destined to die months, years, centuries from now… why have our Apothecaries had to resuscitate him thirty-nine times? He cannot breathe without being plugged into machines that sustain his life by forcing his organs to function.’ Sevatar almost spat as he sneered the final words. ‘I do not believe in fate, or prophecy, or destiny. The primarch is a visionary and a genius, but even he can play the fool.’

Trez, wisely, said nothing. The door rolled open again, mere seconds later. A warrior in a skull-faced helm stood in the opening, his helmet showing the same flared, winged crest as Sevatar’s. Chains decorated his armour, a skull bound to each one – some alien, most human.

‘Sev,’ the newcomer greeted him, already walking into the chamber.

‘Tovac,’ Sevatar replied. They didn’t embrace, or grip wrists in the fashion of closer brothers in other Legions. They regarded one another a long moment, before Tovac Tor removed his helm.‘You look like you died and forgot to stop walking,’ Tovac said.

‘So I hear. How is your ship?’

‘Still a wreck, the piece of shit. It’s a wonder she’s still holding together after the beating the Angels gave her.’ Tovac looked around the room, his black eyes narrowing. ‘The 114th has had little reason to come aboard the flagship for a long time, Sev. I see the primarch has done some redecorating since I was last here.’

‘True enough. We’ll speak of it when the others arrive.’

Tovac nodded, and spared a glance for Trez. ‘Begone, rodent. Your betters are speaking.’

‘Leave him,’ Sevatar waved the matter aside. ‘Let him stay. He’s harmless.’

‘You’re getting soft, Sev.’

Sevatar mimed a theatrical bow. ‘I have no idea what you mean. I’ve always been the very soul of kindness.’

Tovac snorted, a smile curling one side of his lips. ‘It’s good to see you again, brother.’

Sevatar wasn’t quite sure how to reply; that sentiment always surprised him

when others spoke it, nor did he understand why they said it so often. He said nothing of it, merely drawing the other captain's attention to the runic display of ships in the spread of local space.

'We have a third of the fleet gathered now. That's better than I'd hoped.'

'It's a fine start.'

Sevatar wasn't blind to the tension in Tovac's black eyes. The other captain was Terran, but the gene-seed had changed him as it changed all of them.

'Speak,' Sevatar said. 'I'd prefer the new Kyroptera not to begin by lying to one another and keeping secrets. It was a singularly inefficient way to lead a Legion.'

Tovac nodded. 'I thought that's why you summoned me. That's what I wanted to ask, brother. I'm glad to be chosen. Proud, of course. But why choose me?'

'Nepotism. Perhaps I just wished to choose the commanders from among the few friends I have.'

'Sev. Please.'

Sevatar was still looking at the tactical display. Its luminescence painted his face in dappled blue light. 'Because I trust you. And you're an awful liar. I like that. The Pacification of Arvaya may have also affected my decision.'

Tovac grinned – a patently malicious baring of his teeth. None of the VIII Legion smiled with anything approaching grace.

'The 114th enjoyed itself that night, let me tell you. Arvaya's survivors are probably still weeping over the skinning pits.'

Sevatar's reply was cut apart by the doors grinding open again. The newcomer entered more cautiously than Tovac, his helmed head turning between the other two captains. He paid no overt notice to the hanging bodies.

'Captain Sevatar,' he said. 'Captain Tovac.'

'Captain Ophion.'

He took his name as a welcome, entering with his hands never far from his holstered weapons. Ophion was careful not to touch any of the corpses, stepping around them rather than shouldering them aside as Tovac had.

'I confess, I have no idea why I was called to this council.'

'I suspect that will be a recurring theme,' Sevatar replied. 'The others will be here soon. We have to plan the Legion's future.'

CHAPTER IV

The Kyroptera

Var Jahan, Captain of the 27th Company. Born of Terra, as so many of the Legion were. An older warrior, famously cautious, more of a tactician than a murderer. He'd served the VIII Legion since the earliest days of the Great Crusade, when the Night Lords first took to the stars. Sevatar liked him immensely, but had no idea why.

Next was Naraka, Captain of the 13th Company. Naraka the Bloodless, his brothers called him, without the shadow of a smile. He earned the name during the compliance of Eight-Hundred-and-Nine Five, as the fifth conquest of the 809th Expeditionary Fleet. The 13th Company took an entire world without shedding a single drop of blood, through means few of the Legion's other commanders had been allowed to know. When questioned on it, Naraka always refused to comment. His company swore an oath of secrecy, inviolate and unbroken in the many years since.

Sevatar knew what had happened. He liked that story.

After Naraka, there was Tovac Tor, Captain of the 114th. Tovac Lackhand entered the Legion at the same time as Sevatar; as children they'd run together in the same gang. He earned his epithet from a malformed birth, born with only one hand. Despite the deformity, he'd passed the physical trials to enter the VIII Legion, and immediately been fitted with an augmetic graft. It still didn't behave as reliably as a natural limb – the Apothecaries had told Tovac that his malformed arm lacked a fully developed musculature, so his augmetic hand would always be a touch erratic.

Then, there was Ophion. As Captain of the 39th Company, he'd failed to distinguish himself beyond the base level of honour inherent in a century of solid, trustworthy service. All of his records – not that the VIII Legion was particularly meticulous in keeping them – spoke of a veteran Nostraman officer best-served by front-line duties, leading his men from the vanguard, and given only moderate responsibility in a wider campaign. And yet… Ophion had

ordered his warship *Shroud of Eventide* to remain on-station, fighting the Dark Angels back from their ambush, aiding Sevatar and the *Nightfall* as he fought to buy time for the weaker ships to flee. So Ophion apparently wasn't a thinker. Sevatar could live with that. In a Legion that considered tactical cowardice one of the finer and most amusing virtues, a rare sign of bravery was always worth investigating.

Krukesh, Captain of the 103rd Company, was VIII Legion from blood to bone. Taken as a youth from Terra, he rose to his captaincy by a murder duel, taking his former commander's head. Whatever would the Ultramarines or Imperial Fists have thought if such barbarous customs inside the Night Lords had become known before the betrayal? Savagery of that stripe was a natural projection of ambitious warriors freed of moral constraint. The gangland wars of Nostramo Quintus had a hundred varieties of honour duels and succession rituals based on the murder of one's predecessor. *The Pale*, Krukesh was called by his brethren. The primarch's gene-seed whitened the skin of every soul who endured implantation, and blackened the irises of their eyes. Krukesh, however, was gaunt to the point of emaciation, pale past anything resembling ill-health, edging on the preternatural. He was a starved cadaver in midnight ceramite, black eyes burning from sunken eye sockets. Sevatar suspected some form of low-grade gene-seed degeneration: uncommon, but not entirely unknown. Either way, Krukesh and Sevatar had history. Debts were owed, from times past. Even remembering them made the First Captain's skin itch.

Last of all was Alastor Rushal, born of Terra, but not born of VIII Legion genestock. He still wore the armour of his Legion, cast in a cold black, edged in dented white trimmings. The noble emblem on his shoulder guard – a raven in white, with wings spread wide – had been ritually broken by blows from a hammer, wielded in Alastor's own hand. All trappings of rank were gone from his armour, scratched away after the killing fields of Isstvan. Like the Night Lords, his face was pale and his eyes were dark. Unlike the warriors he stood amongst, the helm carried in the crook of his arm lacked the bat-winged crest sported by the VIII Legion's inner circle of captains. In this coven, he stood alone and unmarked.

Sevatar nodded to Alastor, before addressing the group as one.

'You will help me lead this broken Legion. You are now the Kyroptera of the Night Lords. Any questions?'

Several of the others exchanged glances. In the corner, Trez's rebreather hid his smile. Tovac was the one to actually speak.

‘*That’s* your greeting? *That’s* how you welcome us?’

‘Yes.’ Sevatar didn’t blink. ‘Did you expect a speech?’

‘I don’t know what I expected.’

‘Then why do you sound disappointed?’

‘I…’

Sevatar tilted his head. ‘Any real questions?’

‘I have one,’ said Ophion. His face was a mess of recent stitches and skin grafts. ‘Why us?’

‘Because the rest of the Kyroptera are dead, with Var Jahan and myself as the only survivors.’

‘Obviously. And how did they die?’ Ophion asked.

‘The Dark Angels killed some of them. I killed the rest. Or rather, the Atramentar killed them, because I asked them to.’

Ophion snorted, not even remotely surprised. ‘But why *us*?’

Sevatar watched the other captain in silence for several moments. ‘You are a very suspicious man, Ophion.’

‘That I am.’

Sevatar saw no harm in the truth. ‘You are all variously loyal to me, intelligent, reliable, trustworthy, and divorced from the weakness of human compassion. The Legion needs leadership. It needs us.’

‘Then I’ll be the one to say it.’ Krukesh gestured a gauntleted hand at Alastor, his skullish face locked in a sneer. ‘Why is the Raven here? He leads no company. He commands no men. He cannot be one of the Kyroptera.’

‘He can, because I say he can. Unless the primarch rises and countermands my order, the Raven stands with us. Now, to business.’

Sevatar called up the hololithic display again. ‘What you’re looking at, brothers, is over a third of the Legion’s fleet. We’ve had contact with the other mustering points at Ykresh, Taur, and Sotha. The casualty figures are on the wrong side of hilarious.’

‘Don’t keep us in suspense,’ Var Jahan grunted.

‘The Dark Angels destroyed just over twenty-five per cent of the fleet in their ambush. They killed a quarter of the Legion in three hours.’

The new Kyroptera exchanged glances. None of them wished to say anything, leaving Sevatar to continue. ‘It’s only been two weeks. There may be several dozen vessels still in the warp, or caught away from the fallback points. But the confirmed casualties alone are grievous. Every shipmaster saw other vessels die. Collating that list shows a fifth of the Legion dead in the void, or on the surface

of Sheol. So…’

Sevatar turned back to his brothers. ‘The question now, is what do we do?’

‘Revenge,’ said Var Jahan. ‘Vengeance against the Angels.’

‘Don’t make me kill you, as well. Revenge against the First Legion would be a fool’s crusade. I am striving to make this as democratic as possible, but don’t try my patience.’

Krukesh tapped his knuckles on the hololithic table. ‘What of the primarch?’

‘Still in a coma,’ replied Var Jahan, ‘aboard the *Excoriator.*’

‘What is the meaning of…’ Naraka gave the vaguest of waves at the bodies hanging all around, ‘…of all *this?*’

‘*This,*’ said Sevatar, ‘is the result of our primarch’s little telepath no longer doing his job. Isn’t that right, Trez?’

The old man blinked, sucking in a gulp of oxygen through his facemask as the seven warriors slowly turned to face him. His stammered attempt at a response went nowhere. It barely even left his lips.

‘The Sin-Eater is failing us?’ asked Naraka.

‘So it would seem,’ replied Sevatar.

‘My lords…’ Trez swallowed.

‘We’re “my lords” now,’ Sevatar chuckled. ‘I was just “Jago” earlier.’

‘My lords, please. Before the ambush, Lord Curze’s dreams were becoming too poisoned, too dark. I struggled to purge them of the pain.’

Krukesh stalked closer to the wizened archivist. His cadaverous visage stared down at the man. ‘Are you failing in your duties, little psyker?’

Trez’s throat bobbed as he swallowed again. ‘Please… I’m doing all I can… I’ll double my efforts when he returns to us, I swear on my very soul.’

Naraka joined Krukesh, looking down at the hunched scholar. ‘You gave the Legion your word before, telepath. And now you fail us.’

‘Sevatar…’ Trez managed to whisper between panted breaths.

‘I did warn you to be somewhere else,’ Sevatar pointed out. He let his words hang in the air, the implied threat adding blades to the leering black eyes staring down at the archivist.

‘Leave him be,’ Sevatar said at last. ‘We need him.’

The two captains backed away, one chuckling, the other silent. ‘The primarch’s degeneration is a grave threat to us,’ said Var Jahan from across the chamber. ‘Mounting heads on spikes to warn slaves about the price of disobedience is one thing. Dwelling among the bodies of dead legionaries and Legion serfs is quite another.’

Sevatar gently shoved one of the nearby corpses, sending it swaying on its rattling chains. ‘Degeneration is a harsh word. I regret using it myself in the past. Our lord is a haunted man, that’s true. But he remains unbroken. This war – this exile into the deepest black – is what’s poisoning him. He feels useless.’

‘Conjecture,’ said Naraka.

‘You’re guessing,’ Krukesh said in the same moment.

‘Am I now?’

Krukesh hissed in a breath through his bloodstained teeth. ‘Just tell us your scheme, Sevatar. We’re not fools. You’re planning something.’

‘Not a plan. An intent. I’m going divide the remnants of the Legion. I’ll scatter the Night Lords across the galaxy, to fight the war as they wish. Each of you will take whatever forces you can gather, forming one of six Great Companies. And then do whatever you want. I don’t care, as long as you bleed the Imperium. Carve out your own slice of Mankind’s empire. Come with me on the long crusade to Terra.’ Sevatar shrugged. ‘The choice will be yours. Var Jahan, if you are still so ruthlessly committed to fighting the Dark Angels, you can remain with your companies and slow them down, as you desire.’

Var Jahan didn’t comment. Sevatar could see the thoughts curling in the depths of his black eyes.

‘Six Great Companies,’ Tovac said. ‘The Raven will be one of the Kyroptera, but he’s given no men to command? Why include him at all?’

Alastor said nothing. He merely forced a tight smile.

Sevatar nodded to the question. ‘He is one of us, whether he was born of Nostramo or not, and no matter what blood beats through his veins. To be Eighth Legion is more than flesh and bone. He earned his place among the elite at Isstvan. Do you dispute it?’

‘Not I.’ Tovac inclined his head towards Alastor. ‘All here know I hold no grudge against the Raven.’

‘We need time to think on this, First Captain,’ said Var Jahan.

‘You have three nights before I begin coordinating the vessels of the force I’m taking to Terra.’

‘Will you kill us if we disagree with this… division?’ asked Ophion.

Sevatar gave his flesh-hooked grin again. ‘And they told me you weren’t a thinker, Captain Ophion.’

Sevatar boarded the *Excoriator* with Var Jahan at his side, and Ekra Trez trailing along at their heels. In other Legions, the arrival of the First Captain and the

vessel's own commander might have prompted at least a little ceremony. In the VIII Legion, the menials and serfs working in the hangar bay lowered their heads in respectful silence, and did their best to carry on their duties unnoticed.

As the captains walked through the dark corridors of Var Jahan's warship, Sevatar spoke softly.

'There's something I've just realised I don't know.'

Var Jahan glanced to his left, immediately on edge from the introspective tone in his brother's voice. 'Yes?'

'How did the Terrans in the Legion feel when we all watched Nostramo burn? It wasn't their homeworld, after all.'

Var Jahan mused over the question, unsure how to answer. 'Half the Legion is Terran, Sevatar. You've never spoken to any of them about this, even once?'

The First Captain didn't reply. He sometimes had great difficulty recalling that other people had different perspectives to him. Of course he knew that they led different lives, and were shaped by different experiences, but he struggled to imagine their frames of reference. He couldn't, in essence, see things from their point of view.

Part of the problem was that he was so rarely wrong. It made it hard to take other people's opinions and observations seriously. He'd always been this way, even as a child. His mother had told him he'd grow out of it, that he'd become better with people.

He didn't. He hadn't.

It was the same in battle. He didn't know why he was different there, either. He didn't know why he ran faster, killed quicker, and tired slower than they did. He'd duelled Sigismund of the Imperial Fists once – the only warrior ever to beat him to a deadlock in over a hundred years of warfare. The duel had lasted almost thirty long, long hours of sweat, swearing, and the crash-clash of iron against iron.

He'd cheated, in the end. He finished the duel, as hundreds of warriors from both Legions looked on, by headbutting the Templar and disqualifying himself. It broke the rules, as well as Sigismund's winning streak.

True to his nature, Sigismund had done nothing but laugh. The proud stoicism the First Captain of the Fists was so famous for didn't bleach all humanity from his humour. Sevatar had always envied him that, for he found it very difficult to laugh, to joke, to bond effortlessly with brothers in arms.

'Forget I spoke,' he said to Var Jahan. 'Good luck in council with your captains, brother. I will deal with the primarch's transfer.'

The two captains parted ways. Trez shuffled after Sevatar, saying nothing.

I know your secret, Jago. The memory of the old man's words was curiously cold.

Sevatar entered the apothecarion, offering a saluted greeting to the three Apothecaries lingering near the resting primarch. They returned his salute as he approached the surgical slab.

'Any change, Valzen?' he asked the Chief Apothecary.

'None. He sleeps.'

'Any sign of dreaming?'

'There's still no evidence of it, on any cerebral auspex sweep.' Valzen's face was partially augmetic – a silver and steel simulacrum of the features he lost to an Iron Hands warrior's chainfist on Isstvan. The ceramic black eye didn't blink, the mouth didn't move; Sevatar was an indifferent student of history, but he thought the shining visage harked back to the death masks of primitive cultures on Ancient Terra.

'Be ready to transfer the primarch to the apothecarion aboard the *Nightfall*. We leave in three nights.'

'Of course, captain.' Valzen hesitated, though his emotionless chrome face showed no hint of why. 'Why is the Sin-Eater here? I've told you in every report, sir, the primarch isn't dreaming. Trez's presence isn't required.'

'I know. Do not concern yourself with it.'

'As you wish.'

Sevatar looked around the busy apothecarion, at the servitors, the serfs in scrubs and surgical coats, and the Legion Apothecaries remaining by the primarch's side. He knew all three of the warrior-surgeons: Valzen was his own Apothecary, an officer in the Atramentar. The other two were from the Third and Tenth Companies, respectively.

'Leave me,' Sevatar told them all. 'Even you, Valzen. Clear the apothecarion. I want every soul gone.'

'Captain–'

'I have an idea that may bring him back.'

'Sev, I have to stay. You can't expect me to leave.'

'I expect you to do as I order.' In a rare moment of insight, Sevatar softened the demand with a hand on Valzen's shoulder guard. 'And I expect you to trust me, brother.'

Trez breathed slowly, once they were alone. His rasping respiration was a sickly wet rhythm behind the growl of Sevatar's armour, and the digital sounds

of medical equipment.‘So this is why you brought me,’ the archivist said. His voice echoed hollowly around the empty room.

Sevatar stood by the slumbering primarch. In repose, Curze looked less wretched, less weakened by the strains of commanding a guerrilla void campaign out here in the deepest black for more than two years, across hundreds of star systems.

Curze wasn’t born for this. He was a justiciar, a judge, a man born to look traitors and thieves in the eye as he delivered their sentence. And now, what had he become? A general? An admiral? A warleader buried beneath logistics and tactical displays, cast out to languish with his sons at the far end of the galaxy.

Worse, he was a traitor now himself.

Sevatar had seen his primarch’s desperation, the degeneration, the yearning for purpose in the star-scattered isolation of the deep void. He’d seen it taking place since they’d first set sail for the Thramas Sector, and now he wanted answers. Guesses and patience were no longer enough.

Sevatar’s gloved hand remained above the primarch’s pale forehead, fingers half-curled, unwilling to touch his father’s face.

‘This will probably kill you, Jago.’

He nodded to Trez’s words. ‘I know.’

The archivist sucked in a wet breath. ‘You have the strength for this. But not the control.’

‘I know,’ Sevatar said again. ‘But I have to try. I don’t want him to die.’ He looked down at his crimson gauntlet, painted as evidence of his sins. ‘I failed him once already. I won’t let it happen twice.’

Trez sighed, dew droplets of condensed breath sparkling on the inside of his rebreather. ‘There’s no going back from this. If you unlock the gift you’ve fought so hard to forget… Some doors cannot be closed.’

Sevatar was barely listening now. ‘I already struggle to restrain it,’ he said, his voice barely carrying over the humming of the ceiling air vents. ‘Will you help me? I can’t do this alone.’

The old man limped over on a creaking spine and shin-splinted legs. He reached out with a hand blighted by liver spots and the trembles of flaring arthritis, and closed his knuckly fingers around the back of Sevatar’s red gauntlet.

The First Captain lowered his hand, resting his fingertips on his father’s forehead.

‘You said he wasn’t dreaming, Trez.’ Sevatar spoke aloud, dead-voiced and

staring at nothing. ‘You were wrong.’

PART II

SON OF THE SUNLESS WORLD

CHAPTER V

The Boy Who Would Be King

The boy rose from the wreckage, wearing nothing more than smears of ash and dirt clinging to his pale skin. He looked at the sky, dark as the void, blind without a sun's eye. He looked at the metal ruin of his cradle-engine, still hissing steam through its cracked, blistered armour plating. And then, still with nothing resembling an expression on his slender face, he looked to the horizon.

A city. A city of spires and domes, its dull, low lights still brightening the surrounding darkness with a beacon's intensity.

The first expression to play across the boy's face was subtle, but telling. His eyes narrowed as his heartbeat quickened. Instinctively, he knew he'd find others of his kind in the distant, light-rich hive. The thought made him reach for a weapon. White fingers curled around a jagged shard of metal, cooled in the soil.

The feel of the knife in his hands brought a second expression to his youthful, unscarred features.

He smiled.

They could never catch him, no matter how they tried. The boy was a blur of black clothes, cut from the shadows on street corners. His ragged boots barely touched the ground as he ran.

Gunfire chased him, bestial and barking in the night. The bullets were insects, buzzing by his ears. He grinned harder, running faster. Around a corner. Into an alley. He jumped over the filthy rainwater puddles, spinning into a crouch between two large residential waste containers. The boy covered his white hands in his pockets, lowered his head so his dirty black hair veiled his face, and held his breath.

There he waited, a shadow like any other, all movement suspended.

His pursuers came in a breathless pack, their wheezing gasps scented of poisoned water and their skin smelling of other people's blood. Some went left, some went right, but all of them ran through the puddles that turned the alley

into a concrete marsh.

The boy had to try not to smile; their bootprints on the pavement would make tracking them the easiest thing in the world.

One of them stayed in the alley. From his ragged breaths and racing heart, the boy knew without looking that the man's corpulence prevented him from keeping up with his miserable packmates. The boy opened his eyes, rose to his feet, and left the shadows. He let the knife in his hand catch the reflection of a nearby streetlight.

The man turned, looking right into the skinny boy's smiling, snarling face.

His scream drew his friends back. The fastest of them took less than twenty seconds to reach the alley mouth again. When they arrived, there was no sign of the boy, and the fat man who belonged to their pack lay on his back in a rainwater puddle clouding with hot blood, with every finger severed and his skinned face bare to the bone.

He was hungry.

He knew he could rob the dead, take their coins and papers to buy food. He also knew he could simply steal food from the street traders, taking their fruit and warm bread, for he was quick enough to escape without ever being caught.

The boy's stomach knotted, coiling in on itself, groaning with need. He'd tried drinking his own blood the last time he felt this hungry. It helped take the edge off the pain, but left him just as weak as before.

Rats were no longer enough. He needed more. He'd caught one two hours ago, but he needed it to bait his trap. It took all his strength not to surrender to the torment in his stomach and just eat the starved vermin, little crackling bones and all.

Finally, a pack of three wild dogs, each one more ratty and bedraggled than the last, growled and snarled at the mouth of the alleyway, fighting over the dead rat the boy had left in the open.

His tongue tingling, thickened by the hot rush of saliva, the boy reached for his knife and started running.

He watched the city below, crouched on the edge of the rooftop, hunched over in mimicry of the monstrous gargoyle next to him. His clothes were rags with no hope of keeping out the cold. He grew too fast, needing to steal something new almost every week. In truth, he was no longer even a boy. He was already as tall as the people he cut, and carved, and killed.

The territory below belonged to the men and women with red tears tattooed on their faces. The boy usually avoided their domain, but tonight the screaming beckoned him closer. He'd warned them before, more than once. He'd warned them that they'd pay a price in blood every time they came into his part of the city.

And yet they came anyway. They'd come in packs, killing men from the neighbouring district, and dragging women back for sport.

No. No more. The pale man slipped from the roof, lowering himself with nothing more than handholds on the stone walls. His boots graced the alley below with a spectre's tread, and clad in a beggar's rags, he went to see why his warnings weren't being heeded.

They'd left sentries in the row of abandoned factories that marked the edge of their domain. He came across the first one – a man with a mangy hound – by dropping down from a hole in the ruined ceiling.

The sentry turned, raising his gun, but the pale man broke his arm at the elbow and rammed a dagger of glass into his dirty neck. The dog growled, backing away, teeth bared but unwilling to fight. The pale man stared back at it, his eyes narrowed, his own white teeth on show.

The dog ran away, yelping and whining.

Before the pale man left, he sawed through the dead sentry's throat and left the severed head on an iron fence railing. Perhaps placing the warnings *inside* the gang's territory would work better. He'd leave a dozen, perhaps twenty this time.

If that failed, the next time he'd leave forty.

Weeping was music to him. Gunfire was laughter. Sorrow and panic were the verse and chorus to his entire life. Not because he enjoyed them, but because in this city, they were all he heard. They were the sounds that nourished him in infancy, in absence of a mother's milk. With the cries of urban decay in his ears, he grew to manhood – and then into something beyond it.

They were writing about him. He couldn't read, but he still gleaned insight and understanding from looking at the script on a scrap of newspaper, or the scroll of text across a monitor. He learned the local tongue without trying, without even knowing how. The understanding simply came, and it felt right that it should do so.

An avenging soul, they called him. A murderous echo from the Age of Unwanted Law, stalking the city. A ghost from Old Earth haunting the streets at night. First they gave him a name, to put a face on their fears. Soon enough, the

name became a curse.

The Night Haunter.

He ghosted through the cathedral, through this great house to a false god, crawling across the arched ceiling without a sound, lost above where the lights could reach. The queen-priest of this monumental building stole from her people. She bled them of money, of freedom, and of blood. She took their children. She controlled their lives. All for the dubious honour of her protection – protection from other street-kings and alley-queens, who would only do the same things she did.

It saddened the pale man to see how weak people were. Sometimes, they seemed no different from the dogs they used to guard their homes. They took the same beatings, and wore collars just as binding, if not quite as physical. Many of them were skin-inked by their masters, pressed into legal slavery, or simply ran the streets in wild packs, taking whatever they wished by threat or force.

Most of them – those that didn't serve as indentured slaves in the urban cityscape – were foundry workers, toiling in the stinking factories whose breath choked the skies and blocked out the weakling sun.

He walked on the edge of a society with no fear of punishment, and therefore no concept of justice. These people, on the basest level, had no need – no compunction – to obey anything but the rule of might making right. And even that rule was divided, broken down between hundreds and hundreds of petty pack leaders and warlords of the street.

Barely people at all. Closer to animals. Creatures in a hive.

But he'd watched them, and he'd learned. It was only instinct that kept them this way. Instinct could be controlled. Predators could be tamed. Prey could be herded.

The pale man knew he'd have to appear before many of them tonight – the cards had revealed that much to him. The thousands gathered into this place of sleazy sanctuary would see him for the first time. A necessary indulgence, nothing more. He'd learned from them. Now they would learn from him.

He crawled closer, closer, preparing to let go of the ceiling.

The fall would kill one of them, but the pale man had come to terms with being a breed apart. He released his grip, twisting in the air, his ragged clothing spreading out in wounded wings.

The gasps of the crowd were louder than his landing. Their minister, their owner in her fine clothes that stank of gun oil and innocent blood, quivered and

pissed herself. She was dead before she even started to fall, life's fluid gushing from the hole in her chest. The pale man burst the minister's heart in his hand, in a rustling squeeze of abused meat.

'The Night Haunter…' someone said, a lone voice among the stunned crowd. And suddenly they were all saying it, whispering it, shouting it. Some ran, others pointed, others reached for weapons of their own.

He saw the truth in that moment – a truth he'd sensed, but never faced. They hated him as much as their masters did. He was a daemon to them, just as he was to their owners. No one was safe from him.

The pale man turned and fled from their staring eyes, laughing all the while.

The key to change was to show the herd that their sins carried the threat of punishment. They had to see how justice would be done, because it was the only way they would learn.

Fear was the weapon, pure above all others. Fear would keep them compliant, since they'd proven so clearly they couldn't be trusted to keep to the most basic ideals themselves.

The Night Haunter knew all of this from watching and learning, melting his perceptions into the instinctive feeling of how the world should work. Without an education, he cared nothing for ideals of civilisation and culture; their depravity struck him as wrong on a much lower, more primal level. Their violence against each other ran counter to the very drive of herd animals, be they sentient or otherwise. A people divided would never rise, never achieve, never progress. They lacked even the unity required to prosper through hatred of a mutual enemy. Even that would offer some degree of progress and cohesion, yet even that was beyond them. Their lives were governed by the selfish need to steal from each other, and kill their neighbours.

The Night Haunter reflected on this as he gripped the struggling man by the throat. Tonight was a night like any other, with sinners to bleed.

'Please…' the man muttered. He was an old man, and that made it worse. The Night Haunter couldn't help but wonder how many years he'd been leeching coin and blood and life from the people of the city. He existed at the very apex of sin. His foulness tainted all below him.

'Please…' he said again. 'Please.'

Please. How often did the Night Haunter hear that word stammered in his presence? Did they truly expect him to pay heed to their begging?

'I'll give you whatever you want,' the old man said. 'Anything. Anything you

want.’

The Night Haunter’s growl was a wet, burbling thing at the back of his throat. He loathed begging, principally because he didn’t understand it. They knew they were guilty, and justice had come for them. They deserved this. Their actions made it necessary. So why beg? Why seek to flee from the consequences of their own actions? Why sin at all if the price was too high to pay?

He growled again as the man kept begging.

‘You earned this,’ the Night Haunter replied, his voice curiously soft. ‘Do not beg. Do not blame me. This is the end of the path you chose to walk.’

‘Please…’

The Night Haunter shivered in revulsion. *Please.* There was that word again. The first word he’d ever learned, from hearing it leave the quivering lips of countless cowards.

‘I have a family…’

‘No, you don’t.’ The Night Haunter stared through a veil of filthy hair, scanning the empty warehouse. ‘Your wife and daughter are already dead. Your home burned to the ground an hour ago.’

‘You’re lying… You’re lying…’

The Night Haunter let go of the old man’s throat, letting him lie on the ground, unable to move with his arms and legs broken at the elbows and knees. With a knife made from a shard of broken glass, the Night Haunter crouched above his captive. The dagger-tip pressed into the soft skin below the old man’s right eye.

‘Everyone who shares a blood-tie with you is dead, for the crime of sharing in your many sins. This glass is from your bedroom window. I took it after I skinned your wife while she still drew breath.’

He slid the blade forwards, sinking it into the old man’s open eye. That was when the screaming really began.

Three hours later, the old man was found crucified on the spire of an abandoned city militia building. Hollow eye sockets stared out at the people passing, as the rain lashed his flayed muscles. The skinned man took almost twenty minutes to die, all the while shrieking as best he could without a tongue.

The summer and the war both came from nowhere. No summer in memory had ever burned so hot and so long, turning the clouds above Nostramo Quintus sour with pressure storms. The city’s blighted landscape was no stranger to acidic rain as the inevitable result of its foundries’ exhalations, but that season’s downpours were corrosive enough to strip paint from steel, and leave lesions on unprotected

skin.

The war was ostensibly fought in the shadows, but on a world without sunlight, that turned the entire city into a battleground. The Night Haunter knew they were hunting him. He knew, and he encouraged it. It meant the hierarchy leashing the populace was starting to feel threatened. Better yet, they were starting to feel fear. They wanted him dead before he could come for any more of them. The people of the city had hated him for years already, back from when his name had been a whispered invocation of urban myth, and his deeds were no grander than the mutilation and murder of lowlife scum.

But now those in power were joining the game. They feared him, too. Change was slowly taking hold.

The last of the city's lords to fall at his hands had been a land baron, overseeing investments in the adamantium refineries to the south of the city.

'People are animals,' the Night Haunter had said to the cowering noble. 'Without fear of punishment, things fall apart. The centre cannot hold.'

'Please…'

That word again.

'You had all the power, all the opportunity, yet failed to learn the easiest truth of the human condition. You had your chance. Now your death will teach the truth to others.'

The Night Haunter had left his headless body hanging from a power spire by the ankles. The corpse was naked but for the savage decoration of three hundred and nine separate slices across the skin; one for each life lost in a recent foundry fire.

He didn't fear the fact that those in power hunted him now. Let them try. Every day saw him slumber in a different lair – on the days he decided he needed sleep at all. The Night Haunter cast aside the sloughed skin of a dull-witted thug he'd caught assaulting a woman on a rooftop. The flayed wretch had died before the skinning was complete. The woman had fled as soon as she'd been saved, screaming and never once looking back.

The Night Haunter washed his face in the blood of the dead rapist, staining his skin with sin, before running into the city's eternal night.

The bandage on his forearm was stained dark by sweat and dirty rain, but at least the wound had stopped bleeding. The Night Haunter tested his arm, rotating the wrist, working the elbow joint and flexing his fingers.

Sore, nothing more. The bullet would leave a scar, but then, didn't they all?

He’d not looked at himself in a mirror for some time, but running his calloused fingertips across his chest and back offered more than a slight pebbling of scar tissue from bullet holes. He couldn’t dodge everything, no matter how much faster he was than the humans that hunted him.

He was still cold, each evening. Still wretched. But that, too, would soon change. He had an idea. A dream, amidst a life of nightmare.

The Night Haunter watched a cluster of beggar children, orphans of the streets not yet taken into gangs, stripping the jewellery and money from a dead body he’d left in the gutter. He could have killed them – the temptation to do so rose in his throat – but the sight of their scavenging made him laugh.

When the children turned with wide, frightened eyes at the sound, he was already gone.

Entire nights passed when he no longer smelled blood. They kept to their houses and habitats now, rarely taking to the streets once the foundries closed for the evening. No longer did the roads of the city echo with gunfire and the shrieking of the wounded, the abused and the dying.

Still, the Night Haunter watched his city, his people. The sins were quieter, the crimes were hidden, but the city wasn’t free from their corruptive influence. Their fear was all he desired from them, and all he received. Fear brought obedience. Fear forced them to rise above their sickening, animal instincts, and live as humans.

The hunt for his life still dragged on, but there were few within the hierarchy in a position to sustain their grievance. Thugs and hired guns were becoming notorious for refusing to hunt him at all, and the small-minded, cowardly men and women who desired him dead would never take to the streets to do it themselves.

The Night Haunter broke the bone in his teeth, with the last of the meat licked clean. The sour pork taste no longer made him cringe. Years of necessity stole all such reluctance and hesitation.

He tossed the human tibia away, and licked his teeth clean. There were some nights when he almost missed the taste of dog.

‘Ladies,’ he said. ‘Gentlemen.’

The gathered nobles tensed at the words. Their bodyguards reached for concealed weapons. The moment rested on a knife edge.

He crouched atop a minister’s throne, his immense, strangely slender bulk

darkened by the rags he wore over his pale, scarred skin, and the filthy curtain of dark hair covering patches of his face.

‘We must speak,’ he said to them. His voice was a ghost’s breath, all sibilance and subtlety. In the half-light, his eye sockets were sunken pools in a wraith’s face. His smile was a slit between lips the colour of milk.

The bodyguards, armoured only in suits of expensive tailoring, were aiming their weapons at him now. Pistols. Slugthrowers. He bore a host of scars from such weapons. To see twenty of them aiming directly at him now did nothing more than rack his mirthless smile higher.

‘You can’t kill me,’ his voice seethed. ‘Do not even try. This is not how it ends.’

The Night Haunter leaned forwards, his face touched by a sliver of light from the low-power illumination strips set in the ceiling. His gaunt features could’ve been sculpted from alabaster, no warmer to the touch, no more alive than stone.

‘Why are you here?’ one of the nobles asked. ‘What do you want?’ The Night Haunter could smell the coppery rancidity of fear on the man’s breath.

‘I could ask for this city, couldn’t I? But it is no longer yours to give. I’ve already taken it.’

He remained crouched atop the throne, clothed in rags and shadows. He could feel the effect his presence had on them – he could hear the trickle of fear-soiling in their clothing, hear the muffled thunder of speeding hearts, see the rise of the tiniest hairs on their necks.

‘It is my place to raise you above your savage natures. My place, as a creature above and beyond what you all are. I am this city’s sins, so the people may be sinless.’

The bravest of them spoke again, his black eyes unwavering despite the shiver in his fingers. ‘Is that your philosophy? All the murders and desecrations are fuelled by… this?’

‘By reason. By truth. I have learned how your hearts and minds function. With that lore, I brought peace to this culture.’

‘At the cost of freedom.’

The Night Haunter drew in a slow breath though his knife-slit smile. ‘Peace reigns, as I reign. I wouldn’t expect you to understand. You are a little man, with little dreams.’

‘You’ve ushered in the peace of the graveyard.’ The noble dared to take a step closer. ‘Peace, at the cost of surrendering all choice, all freedom. The city lives in terror, forced to live by the standards you place upon our shoulders.’

‘Yes,’ the Night Haunter replied. ‘Yes.’

‘But every sin–’

‘Is punished.’ The Night Haunter listened to their hearts beating blood through their bodies.

‘But punished by death, no matter the crime. No matter the scale of the sin. The people of the city live in silence, lest a single word earn them death for speaking out against you.’

‘Yes.’ The Night Haunter closed his dark eyes, as if listening to that very silence, drifting across the city. ‘Listen. Listen to the sound of raw silence. Is it not serene?’

The young lord shook his head. ‘How very noble of you, *beast*.’

‘Balthius.’ The Night Haunter turned the man’s own name into a whispered, caressing blade. ‘The potential I see in you is the reason you still live. Be silent, and you may yet continue to exist in the glory of my patience.’

‘You are a monster.’

‘No.’ The Night Haunter’s fingers curled into claws. ‘I am an emissary of civilisation. But to be the light in your darkness, I must cloak myself in sin.’

The intruder reached a hand to slowly claw his hair back from his sunken eyes. ‘Humans are animals. *Beasts*, to use Balthius’s own word. But they can be herded, controlled, ruled. The threat of punishment forces them to live by the code of law. Through fear, they rise above the bestial. I am on the edge of great things, my lords and ladies. Great things. I hold this city by the throat. Now, we have peace. We have serenity. Can you even understand the importance of that word? We stand on the edge of great wonders, if we use peace to fuel progress.’

He lifted his hand again, his long white fingers curling slowly together, a blossoming flower in insidious reverse. ‘But I want more. I want more from this city. More from its people. More from this world we call home. I want what’s mine by right, and mine by weight of responsibility to those beneath me.’

At last, the Night Haunter’s sneer faded. He looked at them all, his eyes so cold and hard they could’ve been opals dropped into the sockets of a bare skull.

‘I will be your king.’

CHAPTER VI

Memory

He didn’t hunt any more. The passing of years had stolen the need. His city was a silent hive, illuminated by the light of progress – and the more literal light of streetlamps and beacon towers. No crime, no sin, had been committed in decades. The last vestiges of anarchy and resistance had died out soon after he began to broadcast his mutilations across the city via the picter interfaces available in every home, transmitting his victims’ screaming over the planetary communications net.

Those executions, recorded in his throne room, ended what little crime remained. His people knew he’d take to the streets at the slightest provocation. In their fear, the last souls holding out finally accepted the salvation he offered them.

Nostramo Quintus, capital city of the sunless world, grew by the year.

Spaceflight was no mystery to them, albeit in the most stunted and warpless sense, reaching out to a handful of worlds in neighbouring star systems. Nostramo had traded its abundance of adamantium with these worlds for generations, though under the Night Haunter’s kingship, planetary exports rose to unparalleled levels, as did the profits of such endeavour. The city’s foundries and forge fires burned hotter, the refineries and processing plants spread across the urban sprawl, and the mines clawed ever deeper into Nostramo’s priceless crust.

After curfew, the city slept in absolute serenity. Each dawn, the workforce rose in the half-light of the dying sun, to repeat the cycle of labour again and again and again. It stank of industrial excess – that fiery reek of charcoal and chemical tangs. The people themselves stank of grey lives and bitter fear.

The Night Haunter stood on the balcony of the faceless grey spire he considered his castle, staring down at his city alongside the leering gargoyles shaped into the stonework.

Today would be the day. He knew it, as he knew all things. The answers came

to him as they always did: in his dreams. Since mastering the world, he found his post-mortal senses sharpening beyond anything he'd imagined. He knew, on some voiceless level, he was *becoming* something. He was ripening, maturing, into… whatever he was born to be. It manifested first in knowing what people would say before they spoke, and soon became a habit of dreaming the events of most days on the nights before they happened.

Soon enough, he was dreaming while awake. What would happen began to overlay his vision of what was happening. He'd speak to an underling, losing track of the man's voice, hearing instead the servant's last words when he was destined to die from a heart failure in nine years. He'd see the faces of his governors, each one lined by years they'd not yet lived, carrying scars they hadn't yet earned.

One dream stuck very fiercely indeed, burning brighter than all others.

'Watch the skies,' he'd ordered his district governors at the last conclave. 'A fleet is coming. A fleet of such size, their engines will light the sky the way our sun never could.'

'Will there be war?' Balthius had asked.

'Yes,' the Night Haunter had replied. 'But not with the arrivals. The war will come afterwards, far from Nostramo's shores.'

'Who are they?' another governor had asked. 'What do they want?'

'They are my father's warriors. He is coming for me.'

The city wept at the Delegation of Light. They wept collectively, every man, woman and child gathered on the streets, their pale faces staring at the strangers in their midst, as the sky was brightened by the false stars of void-ship engines.

The strangers walked in a slow, regal parade. The ground trembled, quite literally, with their rhythmic tread. They walked in great, grinding phalanxes, different formations wearing armour of black, of gold, of royal purple or earthen grey. Giants led them. Giants towering above their warriors, as their warriors towered above mortal men. Leading the giants was a sun incarnated in human skin; a god in a man's flesh; his soul-fire uncontainable in a sheath of flesh and bone. Blindness was the reward for all who dared look upon him. Those afflicted spent the rest of their lives sightless but for the image of the living god flash-flamed into their dead retinas.

The people of Nostramo Quintus watched their city invaded by these marching off-worlders, millions upon millions of mouths locked silent, eyes wide with awe. The silence was so intense, so unnatural, it bordered on inhuman. Even the

rain stopped. The storm season itself was holding its breath as the procession of outworld might reached the Night Haunter's tower at the city's heart.

He was waiting for them.

The army ceased as one, every single one of the quarter-million soldiers standing motionless in the same moment. The four giants stepped forwards. The blazing god led them.

The first demigod, clad in wrought gold, inclined his white-haired head in majestic acknowledgement – a king greeting an equal.

'I am Rogal Dorn,' he said.

The Night Haunter said nothing. In his mind's eye, he saw the giant die, dragged down by a hundred murderers in a dark tunnel, their knives and swords wet with the warrior's blood.

The second giant wore armour of patterned grey, etched with ten thousand words, as if a scholar had taken a quill to a stone. He nodded his shaven, tattooed head, likewise inked with scripture – the lettering gold upon the tanned skin.

'I am Lorgar Aurelian,' he said, his voice a hymn where Dorn's had been a measured, stately demand. 'We have been seeking you, brother.' There was sorrow in his otherwise kind eyes – sorrow at the dark city, its unhealthy people, the obviousness of their colourless, exhausting lives.

Again, the Night Haunter said nothing. He saw this warrior crowned in psychic fire, screaming up at a burning sky.

The third giant wore armour of riveted, dense black. His arms were solid silver, yet contoured and moving as living limbs. His voice was the steely grind of a foundry's bowels.

'I am Ferrus Manus,' he said. His eyes were dark, but not cold.

The Night Haunter remained silent, seeing the warrior's head clutched by its empty eye sockets in another man's armoured fingers.

The last giant wore armour painted the violet of an alien sunset. His hair was silvery, long and elegant. He alone smiled, and he alone met the Night Haunter's eyes with warmth in his own.

'I am Fulgrim,' said this last lord. 'It is good to finally meet you, my brother.'

The Night Haunter still said nothing. He saw this final giant in only the faintest of images; always slithering and laughing, never entirely visible.

The god stepped forwards, his arms open wide. He drew breath to speak.

'K–'

The first syllable struck the Night Haunter with the force of a spear through the heart. He went to his knees, gasping for breath that wouldn't come, saliva

stringing from his bared teeth. Blood ran from his burst heart, just as it gushed from his cut throat. His grasping hands had no hope of stemming the flow. His whole life rushed out in a liquid torrent, burning his cold fingers, images of murder hammering against the back of his eyes.

He felt a hand on his head. The pain died in a pulse, restoring his sanity in a moment of mercy. His throat wasn't cut. His heart hadn't burst. The Night Haunter looked up, to see the golden god – faceless and ageless – resolve into the image of a man. The man-god's face could've been the face of any male on any one of a million worlds. It was all men, all at once. The apotheosis of Man.

'Be at peace, Konrad Curze. I have arrived, and I intend to take you home.'

The Night Haunter reached up to rake his sweaty hair back from his gaunt features. 'That is not my name, father. My people gave me a name, and I will bear it until my dying day.'

He rose to his feet, unwilling to kneel. 'And I know full well what you intend for me.'

The scene froze around him. The Night Haunter looked at the Emperor – the godling claiming paternity over a coven of madmen and warlords – frozen in time. He looked at his brothers, at their Legions arranged in beautiful formation behind them.

He looked at the crowd, frozen in the same motionless pict-image perfection. Motes of dust glinted in the air, locked in the same spell as the people all around.

The Night Haunter turned, seeing a figure clad in ceramite the colour of clean midnight, the armour plates cracked by painted lightning. The warrior stood alone, watching in silence, his black eyes never judging, never accusing.

'Sevatar,' the Night Haunter said to the staring warrior. 'You shouldn't be here.'

Sevatar walked closer. His bootsteps echoed around the street, and his black eyes kept darting to the frozen crowds. He avoided glancing at the Emperor. Memory or not, he had no desire to feel his eyes fill with molten gold. The last time he'd looked upon the Emperor in the flesh, he'd endured seven weeks in the apothecarion while his vision healed. Impatience had driven him to the very edge of demanding augmetic eyes.

'My lord,' the First Captain said to his father.

'You shouldn't be here,' the primarch said again. He was Curze now, no longer simply the Night Haunter. He stood in midnight clad, in reflection of his son. His

hands were barbed by the murderous scythe-length claws constructed for him in the laboratory-forges of distant Mars. ‘Tell me why you came.’

‘What kind of question is that?’ Sevatar leaned on his spear, the chainblade resting on the rockcrete road. ‘You are my primarch, father. Why wouldn’t I risk myself to save you?’

‘Because I am *your* primarch.’ Curze shook his head, his smile as dark as his deeds. ‘And I lead a Legion of foul-hearted wretches with no sense of loyalty to me, or to each other.’

Sevatar shrugged, with a grind of armour joints. ‘And yet, I am so very popular among my brothers. The mystery of it all fascinates me.’ He looked around the road again. ‘Why do you dwell on these moments, lord? What calls you back to the past, when the future is still threatened?’

Curze didn’t answer. He beckoned Sevatar to follow, and began to walk down the street, weaving between the statue-warriors of the Emperor’s Children.

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ the primarch said again. ‘Not because this is private to me. I don’t care about that, Sev.’

‘Then why not?’

‘You know why not.’ Curze chuckled, the sound no different from a lizard choking on dust. ‘In a single night, you’ve undone decades of suppressing your *talent*.’ Curze looked back over his shoulder, at his son following close behind. ‘Your psyche is no longer guarded. I can read you, in a way I’ve not been able to do for years. I can see through your barriers, for they are no longer barriers at all.’

Sevatar knew what this was building up to. ‘I don’t want to know.’

‘Yes, you do. Everyone does.’ Curze looked ahead again, turning to move between an isolated phalanx of Ultramarines, led by their stoic commander.

‘I asked you not to tell me back then, sire.’ Sevatar followed, his face darkening. ‘Please keep to our former agreement.’

‘No.’ Curze gave his dusty chuckle again, wind rasping through a tomb. ‘You die in battle.’

Sevatar swallowed. ‘That’s hardly surprising, lord. I’ve no desire to know the rest.’

‘You’re safe, Sev. I see little beyond that obvious truth.’

Sevatar followed in silence for another minute. ‘You are making me regret doing this. I’d hoped to find you, and…’ He let the words hang, unsure he wanted to finish that sentence.

‘And?’ the primarch prompted.

‘And save you, sire.’

‘That’s why I enjoy your company so much, Sevatar. You tell the driest jests.’

Sevatar scowled. ‘I’ve gathered a third of the Legion, Lord Curze.’ He spoke as he always did when officially reporting to his liege lord – in a clipped, clear tone. ‘The Kyroptera stand ready once more. I intend to scatter the fleet, leading the bulk of our forces to Terra. The rest will dissolve into the void, harassing Imperial supply lines, burning worlds, carving fresh skinning pits at the heart of cities. Just like the old days.’

Curze looked back over his shoulder. His teeth were filed now, scored down into tiny ivory daggers, just as they were in the waking world.

‘You say “Imperial” as if we aren’t Imperial ourselves.’

Sevatar nodded to that. ‘I’m not sure we are any more, sire.’ He trailed after his primarch for another few minutes, moving between more warriors in the royal purple of the Emperor’s Children. ‘Trez is with me. I can hear him, feel him, in the back of my mind. He’s helping me be here. I’m not sure how.’

‘He is a good man,’ Curze spoke quietly. ‘At least, as good as one is likely to find in our fleet. We are none of us *good men*, are we?’

‘We do what’s necessary, sire.’ Sevatar passed an Emperor’s Children captain whose armour inscriptions he recognised. He briefly considered trying to kill the warrior here, in his primarch’s memory. If the notion had even a remote chance of success, he’d have done it without compunction.

After passing through the III Legion’s ranks, they started moving their way through the dark, ironclad formations of the X Legion. Sevatar found himself absently glancing here and there for the insignia of warriors he’d killed on Isstvan.

‘Lord?’ he asked after several silent minutes had gone by.

‘Speak, Sev.’

‘Why do you hate us?’ He asked it quietly, carefully, with no hint of offence or malice. The words still stopped Curze in his tracks, causing him to turn. The long blades curving from each of the primarch’s knuckles reflected the golden light of the Emperor’s halo, several streets away.

‘What?’

Sevatar spoke just as casually as before. ‘Why are you the only primarch to hate his own Legion? What have we done to you?’

Curze smiled, barely. ‘I spoke with Angron and Lorgar, not long ago. They told me of their purges, cleansing the untrustworthy elements from the Twelfth and Seventeenth. I laughed when they said it, at the sheer absurdity of the idea.

They knew exactly when to stop the killing of the weak, the treacherous and the corrupt within their bloodlines. I wouldn't even know where to begin culling mine.'

Sevatar snorted in dismissal. 'On any other day, sire, such words might hurt my feelings.'

'Look around you,' Curze said. 'You were born on this world. You grew to adulthood here, just as I did. The Emperor praised me for my rule over this world. Even Fulgrim admired it. A model of compliance. An obedient world, they said. Were my people happy? Did that even matter? I made these people human, despite their feral drives. I made them civilised, despite their baser instincts. I raised them above the level of beasts. That was my responsibility to them, as a superior being. And I fulfilled it.'

Curze looked to the grey spires, rising in every direction, and the frozen smog from the foundries and manufactorums veiling the spire-tops in a haze of pollutant smoke. 'And see how my people rewarded me. I was gone only a handful of years before everything soured. My own homeworld poisoned my Legion with recruits who were worthless as soldiers. Rapists. Murderers. Thieves. The scum. The dregs. The detritus.'

Sevatar almost laughed. 'Sire, you are no different. The Legion is disorderly and vile because it is cast in your image.'

'No.' Curze drenched the single syllable in regret. 'No, you don't understand. I've never claimed to be perfect, Sevatar. But I became the sinner, the monster, the Night Haunter, so my people would never have to. And look at the result. Look at the recruits from Nostramo, less than a decade after I departed. Look at the filth they sent me. Look at the disgusting dregs of humanity my own Apothecaries infused with my genetic material and reforged into transhumans. The Eighth is poisoned, Sev. Generations of men who are murderers in my image, yet devoid of my conviction. They are killers and abusers because they want to be, not because someone had to be.'

'The end result is the same,' said Sevatar. 'Fear is the weapon.'

'Fear is supposed to be the means to the end. Look at the bloodshed my Legion has wrought these last years, even before the Crusade was done. Fear became the end itself. It was all they desired. They fed on it. My sons were strong, so they bled the weak for their own amusement. Tell me, captain, where the nobility is in that.'

'Where is the nobility in any of this?' Sevatar gestured to the streets of Nostramo Quintus around them. 'You can claim a savage nobility, father, but this

is far more savage than noble.’

Curze’s pale lips peeled back from his filed teeth. ‘There was no other way.’

‘No?’ Sevatar answered his father’s snarl with a grin. ‘What other ways did you try?’

‘Sevatar…’

‘Answer me, father. What politics of peace did you teach? What scientific and social illumination did you bring to this society? In your quest for a human utopia, what other ways did you try beyond eating the flesh of stray dogs and skinning people alive?’

‘It. Was. The. Only. Way.’

Sevatar laughed again. ‘The only way to do what? The only way to bring a population to heel? How then did the other primarchs manage it? How has world upon world managed it, with resorting to butchering children and broadcasting their screams across the planetary vox-net?’

‘Their worlds were never as… as serene as mine was.’

‘And the serenity of yours died the first second your back was turned. So tell me again how you succeeded. Tell me again how this all worked perfectly.’

Curze was on him in the time it took to blink. The primarch’s hand wrapped his throat, lifting him from the ground, stealing his breath.

‘*You overstep your bounds, First Captain.*’

‘How can you lie to me like this?’ Sevatar’s voice was a strangled growl. ‘How can you lie to yourself? I stand here, inside your mind, witnessing a theatre of your own memories. Your way is the Eighth Legion way, now. But it has never been the only way. Just the easiest way.’

Curze tightened his grip. ‘You lie.’

Sevatar narrowed his eyes, his last breath escaping as Curze squeezed. ‘You *enjoyed* this way,’ the captain hissed. ‘You came to love it… just as we all did. The power… The righteousness…’

Curze released him. Sevatar crashed to the ground, his armour joints snarling as his ceramite scraped the rockcrete.

‘Son of a…’ he trailed off, catching his breath.

‘The son of a god,’ Curze said softly. ‘Get up, Sevatar. Leave me be.’

The First Captain rose to his feet, his vision blurred. ‘I am going nowhere, sire. Not without you.’

Curze smiled. His son could see that much, at least. ‘I admire your tenacity. I always have. But you are a shadow of what I am, Sevatar. You cannot match me. Go.’

‘N–’

Sevatar filled his lungs, the sterile air viciously cold as he drew it in.

Trez released his hand. The primarch slumbered before them, scarred from the Lion’s blade.

His other senses filtered back into life. He smelled the bleachy, chemical reek of the apothecarion – a smell which could never quite hide the scent of fresh blood. He heard Trez’s laboured breathing, and the beat of the old man’s heart. He heard the sirens.

The…

Sevatar re-tuned back into the vox-net, immediately assaulted by five hundred voices overlaying each other. He focused on the scrolling runes dancing down his retinal display, and activated a direct link to the flagship.

‘This is Sevatar,’ he said.

‘First Captain!’ He didn’t recognise the voice. Human, certainly. But that could be one of several hundred bridge crew. He had difficulty telling their voices apart. In truth, he even had trouble telling their faces apart.

‘Tell me everything.’

‘It’s the Dark Angels, sir. They found us.’

CHAPTER VII

Nightfall

The tactical hololith flickered as the *Nightfall*'s engines flared into full-throated life. After demanding teleportation back to the flagship, it had taken Sevatar fourteen minutes of sprinting to reach the strategium from the principal deployment bay. He'd been worried the battle would be over by the time he arrived; at several thoroughfares, he'd killed crew members that hadn't fled from his path fast enough.

Rarely before had he been so relieved to hear proximity alarms and auspex chimes signifying incoming foes. The fleets still hadn't engaged.

Once he'd reached the bridge, he took in the tactical display, ordered a feed of the ship's status data transferred to his left eye-lens, and took stock of just what was happening.

They were going to lose, that was what was happening. He watched the hololith for another few seconds, discerning the spread of forces in the void, and their projected attack vectors.

He listened, briefly, to the shouting voice of Admiral Yul, being ignored by the Legion commanders he technically outranked.

'Fleet address,' Sevatar ordered.

'Uplink live, captain,' one of the vox-officers shouted back over the shaking of the hull.

'This is Sevatar to the fleet. Let me be clear, brothers and sisters. I am not losing to these pious, deluded, rag-wearing whoresons twice in the same month. Focus all fire on the *Invincible Reason*. They crippled our primarch. Let's return the favour. I need at least fifty ships willing to remain for the attack.'

'Sevatar,' crackled one voice, murdered by vox-distortion. 'This is suicide.'

Sevatar's false smile played out across his cold lips. 'I take it I can't count on your support for the attack run, Krukesh?'

'Not a chance.'

'I hoped you'd say that, brother. It saves me ordering you to flee. Take your

companies and vanish into the black. We'll meet you at Torus Point, for the journey onwards to Terra.'

'We'll be waiting, Sev. Luck be with you.'

Sevatar switched back to the general channel. 'Var Jahan, Naraka, Ophion, Tovac – go with him, or scatter as you desire.'

Two of the four named Kyroptera captains replied in the affirmative. One didn't reply at all. Only Ophion refused outright. 'I'll stay,' he voxed back. 'I'll stand with you, Sevatar.'

'I only need fifty ships. The Kyroptera has to get clear.'

A chorus of *Yes, sir* and *Aye, captain* filtered back from the command decks of the other ships. Over half of the fleet volunteered to stay. It wasn't exactly the defiant bravery of the Ultramarines or the steadfast discipline of the Imperial Fists, but it was nothing to spit at. Sevatar took note of the ship identifier runes flickering gold, electing to remain and cover the retreat.

One of them made his skin crawl.

'Var Jahan,' he said.

'Brother?' the voice crackled back.

'I ordered the Kyroptera to run. You can't risk the primarch in this fight. Get clear of the battle, with the dispersing fleet.'

Sevatar had expected an argument from the veteran, perhaps yet another grunted complaint about authority.

'Sevatar. There's… Lord Curze is stirring.'

'Is he awake? Can he stand? Can he fight?'

'No.'

'Then it changes nothing. Send Valzen back to the *Nightfall* before you break away. I trust your Apothecaries to watch over Lord Curze. I need mine back here.'

'It will be done. Good hunting, Sevatar.'

Sevatar glanced back at the hololith, at the spread of so many ships, friend and foe alike. 'Admiral Yul,' he said aloud.

'First Captain?' came the vox-reply.

'What, exactly, is your plan?'

The admiral relayed his intent. Sevatar listened in silence, and nodded at the very end.

'I like the sound of that,' he said. 'They'll likely name this manoeuvre after you, so let's hope it works. No one wants their name attributed to a hilarious disaster.'

The VIII Legion fleet broke apart, a slow ballet of self-interest and defiance in equal measure. The *Nightfall* pulled ahead of the *Blade in the Black*, leading the armada intercepting the Dark Angels warships.

The rest of the Legion vessels turned tail and fled; some running in formation for the system's coreward jump point, others rolling in the void and boosting away alone, heading in directions known only to their captains.

Sevatar drew his eyes away from the diaspora, biting back a sudden and strange sense of melancholy. This might be the last time the VIII Legion ever gathered in such numbers. The idea made tactical sense, and suited their way of war, but he couldn't help a moment of regret.

The *Nightfall* thundered on, shaking with the strain of its engines.

'Time to engage?' he asked, seating himself in Lord Curze's ivory command throne.

'Six minutes, twelve seconds, First Captain. Ten. Nine…'

'Launch fighters.'

A nearby servitor replied, dull-toned and unblinking, 'Fighters launching.'

'Very good. And open a channel to Wing Commander Karenna.'

The Wrath-pattern starfighter was a sleek shark of a girl, a throwback from a design era where genius minds drew inspiration from the beasts of Terra's ancestral seas as much as from the extinct creatures of its polluted skies. This one was painted in the Legion's colours, with bolts of lightning streaking across her slender hull.

In truth, the Wrath was an outdated model, rare to begin with and increasingly replaced in Imperial fleets by the mass-produced Fury-class. It was said the Fury had a finer temper. They handled more smoothly, they glitched less. Furies were the future, the modern face of void warfare. No rivals. No limit of sub-sector variations. No performance issues that so blighted previous models.

And no soul. Not to Taye.

Flying was more than some sterile interaction with manufactory-spec machines. She could outrun and outfight a Fury in her slower, older Wrath any night. She'd done it enough times already.

As soon as the sirens started, Taye had sprinted down to Preparations, going through the suiting-up rituals with her customary lack of patience. She'd buckled and sealed her pressure suit, putting up with the servitors checking and rechecking her life support backups and spinal interface connections.

'Who's on Ready Five?' her gunner, Vensent, had asked.

‘The Ashen Masquerade. They’ll already be in the void.’ Taye’s short black hair saved her needing to deal with any additional hassle; she took her flight helm from the servitor offering it and fairly dropped it onto her head. She was already fastening her rebreather mask, ready to lock it in place.

‘Hurry up,’ she snapped.

Vensent shared a glance with the naviseer, Kyven, who was similarly slow in suiting up. ‘Slow and steady takes the prize,’ Vensent replied.

‘Slow and steady takes shit-all and nothing. Hurry up.’

‘Spinal connection,’ a servitor mumbled, ‘optimal function.’ The lobotomised slave withdrew its connectivity spikes from Taye’s spine. She winced, as she always did. Less than a minute later, they were running with the rest of her wing, sprinting across the launch deck towards their waiting fighters.

The sirens wailing above were almost drowned out by the rising whine of launch boosters and the yelling of several hundred deck crew. Scrambling a fighter wing was a cascade of coordination, and the *Nightfall* had several of them to get into the air at once.

The deck overseer was a balding rake of a man, more augmetic than human after four decades of service. He thudded over on his spindly bionic leg.

‘Wing Commander,’ he greeted her. He knew what she was going to ask. ‘*Saevio* and *Aetus* are still grounded. *Relinquo* is void-ready.’

She grinned, slapped him on the lump of augmetic gears that served as his shoulder, and was already running again. Twenty-two of her twenty-four fighters were about to ride skywards. *That’ll do*, she thought. *That’ll do nicely.*

Taye was first up the ladder, thumping down into her restraint throne and aligning her spinal sockets with the interface ports in the seatback. She rapped her knuckles on the side of the hull, twice for luck, before settling to get comfortable. Connection came with several insidious *snicks* as the needles slid into her spinal column.

‘I’m in,’ she said. Taye didn’t wait for the others; she started clicking switches and dragging levers at once. The Wrath started to tremble as it breathed again.

Kyven grunted as he buckled himself into his throne, back to back with hers. ‘I’m in,’ he said, and Taye heard the beeping and pulsing of his systems coming online, recognising his bio-imprint in the chair. She also heard him crack a gloved fist against the long-range auspex display.

‘Bastard thing,’ he grunted. ‘They said they’d finally fixed it.’

Taye grinned and said nothing. Vensent was climbing into his throne beneath hers, taking his place in the fighter’s nose. His own array of monitors and

controls rivalled Kyven's, and vastly outnumbered hers. She saw him lean back and tense as he connected.

'I'm in,' he sighed. He reached forwards, locking his hands around the control sticks.

Deck serfs lowered their tinted cockpit visor, hammering it sealed in the final preparations. She heard Kyven rap his knuckles on the hull, and Vensent do the same.

'Wing Commander Karenna,' she said into her rebreather mask. '*Vespera* ready for launch.'

The elevator platform gave a stark judder, beginning its achingly slow process of twisting them into place.

'Taye,' a low, calm voice rumbled across the cockpit vox.

'First Captain.'

'Tactical upload is already under way, but I need you to be aware of one thing in particular, as I'd prefer you to survive the next hour.'

'Name it, sir.'

'Just be ready to land in a rush, wing commander. Make sure your squadron leaders are also aware of the necessity. Fleet Admiral Yul's plan will require a certain reaction speed from everyone outside the main cruisers.'

'Thanks for the warning, sir.'

Sevatar didn't answer. The link was already dead.

'He likes me,' Taye said as they were elevated into position. Deck lights flashed either side of them. The fighter shuddered as it was locked into place.

'We're locked in,' said Kyven. 'Sitting ready. Pressure cylinders optimal, catapult primed. All signs are go for thrust.' He paused for a moment, and broke the cockpit's relative quiet with a muttered observation. 'It's not you. He likes all of us.'

'He doesn't like anyone,' Vensent called back over his shoulder. 'He owes us, and we're useful to him. Huge difference.'

Sevatar watched the approaching armada, still too distant for visual confirmation but shining bright on the tactical hololith. Fire-control directions, updated every few seconds, passed between every vessel in the fleet, sent onwards to their escort vessels and fighter squadrons. Formations were still loose as the fleet accelerated to meet the Dark Angels, but he could see their alignment beginning to come together.

They had to buy more time. If the Dark Angels weren't slowed down, they'd

be all over the retreating fleet in a matter of minutes.

One rune on the display still troubled him. Being outnumbered eight to one wasn't the problem. If Yul's plan worked, they'd inflict maximum damage with minimal losses, and if it didn't work, the majority of the VIII Legion fleet would be long gone, anyway. The mystery of how the Lion was managing to jump his entire armada with such unrivalled unity was a matter for idle consideration, but hardly an issue Sevatar could deal with at this moment.

No, the problem was one single rune – one of his own vessels – still wavering on the ghostly display, while the rest of the fleeing warships were winking out of existence, entering the warp and running free. First, the rune had maintained formation with the leaving ships. Then, it ceased. It remained dead in space, surrounded by its secondary frigates and fighter escorts.

Sevatar turned to the Master of Vox, in the dark robes of a Legion serf. 'Hail them,' he said, gesturing to the flashing rune.

The slave tapped at his console, mechanical fingers a blur. 'Done, sire.'

'This is the *Nightfall*. *Excoriator*, report. Why have you killed your engines?'

The seconds ticked by. 'No reply, sire,' said the Master of Vox.

'Thank you,' Sevatar sneered. 'I can hear that myself. Var Jahan, do you read me?'

Silence, again, was the reply. Sevatar drew his thumb across his throat, ordering the link's end. He had a feeling he knew what caused the *Excoriator* to halt, and the idea wasn't a pleasant one.

The *Nightfall's* strategium bustled with slaves, serfs and servitors doing their duty, emotion rising from their skin with the stench of sweat. The tension was a palpable thing, something Sevatar could almost savour. Training and familiarity shielded them from the kind of fear he'd feel as a tingle on his tongue, but the anticipation still soured their collective breath. Hundreds of hearts – and surrogates of clockwork and chrome, simulating vital organs – melded into something almost operatic.

'Time until maximum weapons range?'

'Twenty-nine seconds, captain.'

'All hands, brace for incoming fire. Cripple every ship we pass, but be ready for the flagship. I want everything, *everything*, aimed at the *Invincible Reason* when we pass her. Kill her, and we can leave Thramas with our heads held high.'

A desperate brutality had both sides ignoring every convention of void warfare. The *Nightfall* and the *Invincible Reason* knifed through space to reach one

another, abandoning their strengths as long-range weapons platforms in favour of mauling each other face to face. Imperial void battles were usually fought at breathtaking distances, with mathematics and logistics as vital as a captain's instinct.

The *Nightfall* ploughed through the opposing fleet, its shields revealed in swirling, iridescent light under the onslaught. It burst past the *Star of the First Legion,* scattered the cruiser's escorts, and killed its way through the enemy outriders to plunge into the heart of the enemy fleet. The VIII Legion warships roared in pursuit, running for the hole in the enemy formation punched by their wounded, crumbling flagship.

Rage ruined all need for subtlety and tact. The two flagships, among the largest and most heavily-armed creations ever to rise from the collective genius of the human race, speared closer with no regard for their support craft.

Sevatar watched the spread of occulus screens, each one alive with an image of ships dying in the dark; black steel breaking apart, ghost-fire vanishing into the void. Sensitive Nostraman eyes winced closed across the bridge, as one of the screens showed the warship *Tenebor* die under the guns of seven Dark Angels cruisers. Its prow wreckage, still haemorrhaging debris and crew, lanced through the rear of the *Pridemark*, igniting the Dark Angels vessel's warp engines and killing the entire ship in a migraine of foul light.

The fifty Night Lords vessels dived straight and true, never deviating, never diverting. Dark Angels cruisers banked and veered to avoid collisions – the heavy warships rolling with ponderous grace, the smaller destroyers accelerating aside, apparently effortless.

Sevatar kept wincing, struggling to focus on the brightness of every ship's death, or even the eye-aching streams of massed lance fire. The void surrounding the VIII Legion formation was bitter with the flaring rage of three hundred firing solutions. Ship after ship dissolved under the First Legion's fire, their hulls pockmarked by laser batteries and sliced open by lances.

A voice rasped over the shaking deck, sighing a single word. '*Nightfall*.' There might have been more, but static swallowed all trace.

Sevatar knew the voice. His glance flicked to the relevant screen, just in time to see the *Blade in the Black* die surrounded and crippled in a storm of Dark Angels destroyers.

We'll need a new fleet admiral, he thought with a smirk. Another ship, a Dark Angels vessel, went critical off the *Nightfall*'s port bow. This one was close enough to hammer the ship with shockwaves, and bleach several occulus screens

with distortion.

The lights did more than hurt his eyes. The pain acid-danced back along the nerves in his skull, flicking at his forebrain. He wiped his mouth on the back of his gauntlet, the sudden nosebleed barely showing against the red glove. Now, of all times. Typical.

On the primary occulus, the immense bulk of the *Invincible Reason* hove into view, scarred and burning from the VIII Legion's own lance strikes. Sevatar could almost see the insectile buzzing of his fighter squadrons around the enemy flagship, thick as fleas on a mangy hound.

'The moment we come abeam…' he said, and went no further.

'Captain?' called one of the deck officers.

Sevatar breathed out, staring at one of the screens drenched in static. A faint image resolved, of a ship that should be anywhere else but here.

'This,' Sevatar said to no one in particular, 'will not end well.'

'Break!' Kyven cried out.

'A few more seconds,' Taye hissed. She fired, streaming energy from the underslung lascannons, slicing through a Fury's wing.

'*Break!*' Kyven yelled again.

Taye wrenched on her control sticks, pulling into a spiralling dive, and *Vespera's* engines gave a draconic roar as the fighter strained to obey. Las-fire sliced past them, close enough to leave dancing afterimages across Taye's vision.

'He's still coming,' Kyven called back.

Taye breathed a Nostraman curse into her rebreather, pulling out of the dive too hard, too fast, leaning right into a brutal arc. Inertial dampeners kicked with enough force to slam all three of their helmets against the sides of their restraint thrones.

That's when she saw the *Excoriator*. Dizzy, with the taste of blood on her tongue, she threw everything she had into rolling away from the oncoming tide of dark iron.

The warship burned past them, vast enough and close enough to make her shiver, fully eclipsing the rest of the battle as its battlemented hull sailed past in flames. The breakneck dogfight she'd been locked in simply ceased to exist. The Night Lords vessel slammed indiscriminately through space, far too huge to care about the dealings of the steel flies around its skin.

Taye's earpiece surrendered to static as she lost contact with her wingman. She knew without a second's doubt his fighter, *Relinquo*, was a smear on the

Excoriator's rippling void shields. Voices cried out – in pain, in fear, in frustration, all demanding the same thing. *What do we do? What do we do? What do we do?*

Taye needed to spit, but taking off her rebreather was hardly an option. She swallowed the rank, coppery slime her spit had become, and leaned back in her throne, bleeding power from the stabilisers back into the engines.

'Whoever the hell is still alive, follow me.'

Kyven's voice was strained behind her. He kept his words off the vox-web. 'We just lost half the squadron, and only four of the Masquerade are showing up on my auspex.'

'We're still here.' *Vespera* gave a smooth shiver as Taye kicked her back into attack speed. The *Nightfall* bloomed ahead, savagely damaged, still sucking up more than its share of enemy ordnance. 'And we still have a flagship to defend.'

The Excoriator heeded neither friend nor foe. The VIII Legion ships demanding it fall into formation went as ignored as the Dark Angels cruisers drowning it in fire.

Sevatar watched it roll, wounded to the point of being held together by nothing more than spit and spite. He could tell from its trajectory that it wasn't even aiming to ram one of the enemy ships. It was just… dying. A drawn-out, graceless dive through the enemy fleet, breaking the VIII Legion's formation, and putting a blade to the throat of the late Admiral Yul's first and final plan as void commander.

Sevatar sighed. Despite the tremors rattling the strategium, he calmly sat down in the primarch's throne, and rested his cheek on his gauntleted knuckles. A shame, really. It had been a good plan.

He wiped blood from his face again, this time from his jawline, below his ear. How very vexing.

The bridge vox hissed back into life with several false starts. 'Sevatar,' said a deep, distorted voice, bare of any emotion beyond the faintest, oily amusement.

'Welcome back, father.'

'We can finish this now. Join me.'

'Let me guess,' replied Sevatar. 'You plan to teleport onto the *Invincible Reason*, don't you?'

'I have a fight to finish.'

'Yes,' said Sevatar, reaching for his spear. 'Of course you do. Does it not matter that in a handful of minutes, we can punch out through the Angels'

rearguard and rip into the warp?'

The answer was several seconds in coming, preceded by the muted shouts of dying humans aboard a burning ship.

'Come with me. Bring the Atramentar. Finish this at my side.'

Sevatar looked out over the bridge, elevated above the crew on a raised dais. The officers and serfs not frantically engaged at their stations or down on the deck with concussion and blood loss were looking up at him with the expressions of lost, moronic mongrels.

'Is that an order, sire?' he asked, already knowing the answer, already reaching for his helm.

'You know it is.' The link blanked in another wash of static.

'This is why the Imperials always win,' Sevatar mused aloud. 'They don't get in each other's way. Discipline may be dull, but it has undeniable military application. How long until we can fire boarding pods?'

'We'll be abeam of the *Invincible Reason* in just under ten minutes.'

Ten minutes. Every Night Lord on the flagship was already at battle stations, ready to repel boarders. The Atramentar would be within a stone's throw of their teleportation chambers, and those that weren't would be close to at least one boarding pod launch bay.

Sevatar rose from the throne, momentarily glanced at the waterfall-spill screed of Nostraman runes on the damage report data-feed, and stalked from the bridge with only one final command to the crew.

'I may be gone a while,' he said. 'Try not to get my ship killed.'

CHAPTER VIII

Unwanted Battle

The ships were abeam now. He could tell without needing to see, discerning it purely from the *Nightfall*'s distinctive shivers. Lance fire didn't rattle the decks the same way impact damage or las-batteries did. Every tremor of torment had its own sensation. This was the grinding vibration of massed broadsides against unshielded steel, the void-war equivalent of pulling in close to your prey and knifing them in the ribs.

If they ever made it through this, the *Nightfall* would need to be drydocked for an eternity. They might as well commission a new flagship – Sevatar suspected it'd be finished faster than repairing the damage. He could smell the smoke of dying machinery all around; the chemical stink of burning cables and melting metal. People were screaming on decks above and below.

The First Captain made his way down the shaking hallways, immersed in the darkness so common on VIII Legion ships. Crew members passed him with lamp packs and photo-visors to penetrate the gloom, giving him a wide berth. He paid no attention to them; he knew in a vague sense that they loathed him, but he wasn't sure why, and couldn't bring himself to care. Their hatred or regard never made any difference to his existence, either way. They obeyed when he wanted them to obey. The rest of the time they scrambled to get out of his path whenever they saw him. The perfect balance.

As he ran, he spoke a steady stream of orders into the vox, coordinating the Atramentar first and his sub-captains second. Of the nine companies berthed on the *Nightfall*, he'd only risk one. His own. The Atramentar were coming with him; the others, despite their captains' protestations, would remain aboard the *Nightfall* and make the run to Terra.

Sevatar was under no illusions that they'd be coming back from this assault, and he had no compulsion to drag thousands of warriors to inevitable, unnecessary deaths. Let them live their lives to their own ends, in pursuit of more purposeful deaths.

He was still running when Atramentar squad leaders started reporting teleportation ignition flares. Each report ended with a Mechanicum adept bleating out an addendum in monotone: ‘Translocation process complete.’

The ship gave another shake, this one brutal enough to throw several crew from their feet. One of them – a female in a technician’s overalls – broke her head open on the deck when she fell. Sevatar vaulted them all as he kept running, smelling the blood from their injuries.

The next shiver was an echo of the last. What little light existed on the *Nightfall* flickered and died for several seconds. It made no difference; his eye-lenses presented everything in prey-sight monochrome, and he was almost at the nearest translocation platform.

A sound made him stop dead. A straining, yearning whine of protesting metal – a whale’s mournful song as it was gored by hunters’ harpoons. The lights died again, leaving him in the familiarity of absolute darkness.

‘Reactor death,’ the vox droned. ‘Reactor death. Reactor death.’

Clutching his chainglaive, he started sprinting again, his armour’s systems answering his need by opening an automatic channel to the bridge.

‘Report,’ he voxed.

‘We’re dead in space, captain, but momentum is carrying us forwards. Half the turrets are deactivated; the hangars are locked open; the primary and secondary lance arrays are silent; and most of the torpedo racks aren’t responding. Spinal battlements are still firing from reserve generators. Life support and artificial gravity are still feeding from their secondaries, but the void shields are down for good.’

‘Navigation?’

‘Dead. The arterials to the secondary power reserves are cut.’

His blood ran cold. Colder, at least, than usual. ‘Boarding pods?’

‘They won’t fire, captain.’

‘Teleportation?’

‘Dead.’

Sevatar skidded to a halt, breathing through his closed teeth. He was the only member of the First Company trapped on the stricken flagship. The others were already aboard the *Invincible Reason*, fighting for their lives, killing Dark Angels at the primarch’s side.

‘I will not abandon them,’ he whispered.

‘Captain? What d–’

He killed the link to the bridge, and started running again. This time, he

descended through the ship, navigating corridors blocked by wreckage and running through hallways choked by smoke and fire. Dead crew lay everywhere he looked.

‘Taye,’ he voxed. ‘Taye, listen to me.’

‘There he is.’

‘I see him.’ Taye rolled between two spires on the *Nightfall’s* backbone, drawing closer to the Corsair she was chasing down. The battlements blurred past below, but she didn’t risk firing. There was enough firepower striking the flagship’s burning back; she wasn’t going to add to it with a misfired stream from her lascannons.

All the while, the curved Nostraman rune for *Hollow* pulsed in her heads-up display. She needed to land and reload. *Vespera’s* missile racks had been empty less than a minute after the fighter raced from the hangar bay.

‘Let it go,’ Kyvan warned her.

‘Not a chance.’ She chased harder, faster, rolling between another two armoured spires. ‘We’ve almost got him.’

The Corsair was an ugly thing, vulture-winged and fat-arsed – a back-heavy brute that Taye had never liked the look of. This one wasn’t going home to any victory parade, she’d see to that.

Hollow, Hollow, Hollow, her missile racks complained, again and again. She had her cannons, but…

‘Vensent,’ she breathed. ‘I’ll overshoot him once he passes the Travius Pylons. Break his back when I do.’

‘Consider it done.’ He rolled his swivelling, pivoting throne back to face forwards, lining up his turret. ‘I can kill him now.’

‘His wreckage will hit the superstructure.’ Taye spoke through clenched teeth, eyes narrowed with effort. Sweat painted her back, making her spinal sockets sting. Turrets below them spat lascannon beams into the void, some aiming for enemy attack craft, others carving insignificant wounds in the skin of the *Invincible Reason.*

Taye risked a glance upwards, seeing the matt-black hull of the enemy flagship filling the roof of her cockpit. No amount of training could prevent a moment of disorientation. She blinked and refocused on her prey running ahead.

‘Plasma bombs,’ Vensent called back. Taye could see the detonations popping up along the *Nightfall*’s spine as the bomber’s payload started to rain down. *Vespera* was climbing, almost above the Corsair now, and she still had to weave

around the sprayed streams of laser fire from the bomber's frantic crew.

'Just kill him!'

Vensent fired, carving down and severing the Corsair across the middle. The front half, with its hunched wings, tumbled onwards into the one of the two Travius Pylon towers, shattering the remote anti-aircraft defences on the spire's battlements. The bomber's bulky engines hiccupped blindly, spinning away into the void.

'We're engaged,' Kyvan voxed. 'Another Fury, chasing us down the spine. I think they're annoyed at the eight Corsairs we've killed.'

'I can lose him.'

'Get away from the damn ship. We need to break off.'

She didn't bother answering. The *Nightfall*'s shields were down and enemy bombers buzzed around with clingy, verminous tenacity, spitting plasma bombs into the flagship's structural weak points. She was going nowhere.

'Taye,' her vox crackled. The voice was marred by sirens in the background. 'Taye, listen to me.'

'First Captain?'

Sevatar repeated her name, and gave her an order she didn't understand.

'I… I don't… Please repeat that order, sir.'

'I said "land your fighter". At once.'

Sevatar was waiting for them, his armour streaked with scorch marks, and his chainglaive in hand. The calm at the eye of the storm; around him, the chaos of the hangar rattled and raged on, with serfs extinguishing fires, debris crashing down from the ceiling, and amber flashing lights warning of a depressurisation threat.

He watched the Wrath fighter come in at speed, most of its painted hull bleached down to the gunmetal grey beneath, scored away by the clattering pebbles of debris that always filled the space between battling warships.

Vespera, it was called. Yes, that was it.

The fighter fired the retros beneath its wings, and by the lascannons mounted at the nose. Its vented thrust screamed out into the hangar, sharper than a condor's shriek. Sevatar's left eye twitched once, before his helm's auditory senses adjusted to compensate.

Taye didn't use the runway to touch down; she killed all thrust with timed bursts from her retros, and brought the fighter down in a tight spiral. Sevatar was moving the moment the landing claws crunched onto the deck. He jumped up,

grabbed the edge of one slicked-back shark-fin wing, and pulled himself up with one hand.

‘Go,’ he voxed.

There was no answer, and a glance at the cockpit showed Kyven staring back at him wide-eyed from the rear-facing seat, with Taye hunched round in her throne, trying to see what was going on. He could hear them breathing over the vox.

‘You… you can’t be serious,’ she said softly.

Sevatar stalked along the back of the fighter, mag-locking his boots to the Wrath’s dark skin a few metres behind the cockpit. He shook his head at the naviseer’s moronic expression of shock.

‘I said *go.*’

He crouched low, taking three punches to smash a deep dent in the fighter’s hull, just enough to grip the edge. He kept his spear held behind his back, angled away.

The fighter thrummed beneath his boots, coming alive again.

‘Sevatar, this is insane.’

He rolled his black eyes behind the red eye-lenses. How tiring it was, to hear those words yet again. Sometimes, he wondered if ‘duty’ was just a word to other people, and they never truly grasped its meaning.

Without a launch catapult, the fighter lifted off slowly, gliding away from the deck towards the wide maw leading into the void. The castle battlements of the enemy flagship were drifting by, tantalisingly close, but impossibly far.

‘Get me to the *Invincible Reason*,’ he voxed. ‘My men are fighting aboard, and I’ll die before I send them into a battle I wouldn’t join myself.’

He could hear the grin in her words, the smile breaking through her disbelief. ‘You’re taking that oath of First Company brotherhood far too seriously,’ she said.

Sevatar didn’t reply. He was Atramentar. His brothers were Atramentar. There was nothing to say.

Kyvan spent the next three minutes looking directly at the crouched form the of the VIII Legion’s First Captain, mere metres away. Sevatar’s crested helm remained fixed forwards, the skull-painted faceplate staring ahead at the Dark Angels warship. Kyvan kept wondering what expression was behind the slanted red eye-lenses.

Taye, for her part, leeched everything *Vespera* could give, burning the engines

dangerously hot, engaging no one, rolling in spirals and pitchbacks to shake loose any of the black Furies that tried to latch onto her. She was all too aware of the g-force her ‘passenger’ would be suffering, but had to keep the engines flaring for maximum manoeuvrability.

When she pulled close to the *Invincible Reason*, Taye angled to cut alongside the hull, weaving between the battlement towers.

‘Where do you need to be?’

‘*Close to the bridge.*’ Sevatar’s vox-voice had all the warmth of a wolf’s dirge-howl.

Close to the bridge would bring them in range of a hundred and more defensive turrets. Taye swore under breath.

‘Watch your language, wing commander.’

She gunned the engines harder, switching to the squadron’s general link. ‘*Peritus* and *Electus*, form on my wing, at once.’

‘Copy, commander.’

‘On my way, ma’am.’

Taye swooped closer to the hull, almost close enough to lose a wing if she rolled. Her heart kept rhythm for her as she dived into the most foolish attack run of her military service.

CHAPTER IX

The Prince of Crows

He had to admit, even if only to himself, that this was one of his less wise ideas. No amount of biological enhancement, nor even the most advanced suit of Maximus-pattern power armour, could shield him from the gravitational forces pressing against him. He felt nausea for the first time in over a century, which was novel enough to make him grin.

The pressure against his skull and limbs, however, was less entertaining. The suspensor-wire pressure flightsuits worn by Taye and her crew shared some basic functionality with one of the layers in his own ceramite armour, but it didn't render him immune to physics. Having skinned and flayed countless humans, as well as warriors from five different Legions – including his own – he suspected the feeling of inertial forces threatening to pull his bones apart was fairly approximate on the continuum of pain.

Stark lascannon beams flensed his vision, each one a rapid spear that defied his eye-lenses' attempts to fade and counter the brightness. Taye's fighter swayed and swung beneath him; he could feel her doing her best to coax performance from the Wrath without shaking him loose or killing him with any wrenching manoeuvres. Even so, as the black towers slashed past either side, and the battlements below became a blurring, queasy road, he came close to cursing the idea as a rash move.

But then, that would be admitting he'd been wrong. Sevatar snorted at the notion. *We can't have that, now.*

The stars tumbled across the sky as Taye rolled again. Sevatar's one concession to the insanity of his plan was to grunt once, quietly, with his head aching from the acid of dizziness. That, also, was novel. His genetic implants had left him almost immune to disorientation these past decades.

He felt Taye ease back on the speed, winding and weaving to dodge the pyrotechnic storm of turret fire from below. He knew she'd never be able to reach a dead stop, but slowing enough to lessen his momentum would be more

than enough. A few bruises and broken bones would be easier to bear than being pulped against the *Invincible Reason*'s armour plating.

But her arc carried him over the spinal castles, across the bow, and he finally realised what she was doing.

'This is even stupider than my idea,' he voxed to her.

Her voice was tight, tense, her attention anywhere but on him. 'Your way will see you smeared across the hull. My way, you get to play hero.'

The fighter drifted into the landing bay, retros flaring to slow down. Servitor crews immediately stood straighter, dead eyes and refocusing eye-lenses tracking the craft's approach. Scorch marks darkened the hull in place of paint, and its insignias were similarly bleach-burned into vague nothingness.

The closest munitions officer was a man by the name of Halles Korevi, and he was directing a loader team to rearm this latest in an endless stream of landing and redeploying fighters, when it jinked above the deck and shot him to pieces with a volley of roaring blue energy from its lascannons. Internal fire-teams opened up on the drifting Wrath, naval armsmen discharging wide-mouth shotcannons that had little hope of hitting a moving target.

An armoured figure rose from the fighter's back, a bolter in one hand and a spear in the other. He fired down as he ran along the backswept wing, four bolts bursting in the chests of four armsmen, spreading viscera across their fellows. Shotcannon fire still clattered against his midnight-blue ceramite, leaving ignorable silver scratches on the dark plate. He reached the end of the wing and jumped clear.

The fighter's engines whined louder, firing the moment his boots left the wing. In a burst of engine wash, she was gone, leaving a sonic boom and the alkaline stink of lascannon discharge in her wake.

The figure landed hard in a crouch, boots sinking twin dents into the iron deck. Atop the spear, a metre-long chainblade started chewing the hangar's cold air. The armsmen, to their credit, moved into cover and kept firing, despite never training to face a warrior of the Legiones Astartes.

Sevatar twitched twice, flinching as the spreading flak rattled against his armour. *Irritating bastards.* Retinal warnings trailed and flashed across his vision, and his armour's autosenses kept pulling at his left arm, trying to raise his bolter to fire at the humans in cover. He locked the boltgun to his thigh, and the moment he rose from his knees, he started running – not towards them, but heading for the massive open doors leading deeper into the ship. The temptation

to waste yet more time and carve them limb from limb was almost too strong to swallow.

‘You get to live,’ he growled, ignoring their continued fire. ‘I have bigger prey.’ As he plunged into the siren-lit corridors making up the *Invincible Reason’s* hollow veins, he tuned into First Company’s vox-web, no longer denied access by distance.

‘Ladies,’ he greeted them, still sprinting.

‘Where in the hell have you been?’ spat back the first voice. Several others joined in, sharing the same sentiment.

‘You have no idea,’ Sevatar replied. ‘Where is the primarch?’

‘Engaged at the fift–’

Sevatar shoulder-barged through a crowd of black-robed menials, stumbling over their tangled limbs and carelessly shattering their bones beneath his boots. Up and running a second later, he swore across the vox.

‘Repeat that,’ he said. ‘Some fools got in my way.’

‘The primarch is engaged at the fifteenth concourse,’ Valzen replied. ‘Half of us are here with him.’

The fifteenth concourse. Sevatar knew the STC Gloriana-pattern battleship as well as he knew the contours of his own armour. The *Nightfall* was born of the same breed.

‘That’s madness,’ he voxed back. ‘You’ll be encircled by every Dark Angel left alive on the ship. There’s nowhere to run.’

Valzen’s answer was interrupted by a shriek over the vox, and the knocking grind of a bone-saw doing what it did best.

‘We’re *aware* of that, sir.’

‘I’ll be there in seven minutes,’ promised Sevatar. ‘Eight if there’s resistance. Nine if the resistance is carrying bolters.’

The resistance was carrying bolters.

Laying siege to an enemy warship was always a clash of contrasts. Corridor by corridor, chamber by chamber, an attacker could spend half an hour encountering no enemy presence at all beyond confused serfs and slaves, before promptly spending the same span of time needing to fight for every footstep of ground, killing through squad after squad of dug-in defenders. A Gloriana battleship was the size of a densely compacted city, and accordingly populated not only by officers and expert crew, but by a slave-caste numbering tens of thousands of souls. Most were consigned to live in the warship’s lightless bowels, breathing

poorly-ventilated air and furnace fumes, but many still saw service on the upper decks.

Sevatar chewed through them with barely a hitch in his stride. His chainglaive ticked and stuttered, clogged with meat after only a few minutes. Those humans too brave or foolish to flee met their ends in a whirr of eviscerating machine-teeth, torn apart or left deformed and ignored in his wake.

A hundred of the VIII Legion's best warriors had teleported aboard, in full Terminator wargear. The trail of their devastation was almost hilarious in its absolute severity. On more than one deck, Sevatar's boots splashed through a marsh of shallow blood and carved human meat.

But the Dark Angels weren't beaten. Not even close. Even with the Atramentar sweeping these decks clear, reinforcements were flooding in from other parts of the ship, storming their way to the strategium to defend their primarch. *Not that he needs defending*, Sevatar mused. Not if the last time they'd met was anything to go by.

He'd killed seven Dark Angels already. One of them ended life as a trophy, the warrior's helm now chained to Sevatar's belt. No higher honour for an enemy of the VIIIth Legion. In such remembrance, they paid respect to their fallen foes.

At the junction ahead, another three Dark Angels in pale tabards over their heraldic black held the line, bolters kicking in their fists. Sevatar crouched behind the relative cover of a corner, reloading his own weapon, lip curling as he crunched home his last magazine. He could kill them up-close easily enough, but putting a bolter in his hands evened the odds in a way he never enjoyed. He hadn't lied when he told Trez he was Eighth Legion to his core. Just like his brothers, he'd never cherished a fair fight. Sport was one thing, but it hardly compared to hunting prey. In that, at least, he was made in his primarch's image.

He risked a glance around the corner, pulling back as a shell detonated close to his faceplate, showering him in debris.

'It's Sevatar,' he could hear them shouting to each other. 'It's the First Captain. I saw him.'

He grinned as he imagined the silhouette he cast in his armour, with the sweeping dark-iron wings rising from his helm. *This accursed helmet crest*, he thought. His enemies always recognised him by it.

The gunfire fell silent. He heard strangled grunts and the clanging wallops of weapons striking ceramite. Emerging from cover, he broke into a run, joining the melee.

Alastor Rushal, clad in the same black as the Dark Angels he was killing,

nearly died first. Sevatar's retinal display locked onto him with the Nostraman rune for *Threat* blinking bright, registering his Raven Guard armour and the thundering meteor hammer spinning in his fists. The First Captain turned, lancing his glaive through the last Angel's back, letting the hungry teeth do their work. He ended the downed warrior with a boot stamped onto the Angel's throat.

The blood patterning his armour went ignored, as did the bodies at his feet. One of them reached a weak hand to scrape strengthless fingers along his boots. Sevatar drew his bolter and fired downwards, without even bothering to look.

'You won't believe how I got here,' he said to Rushal.

The Raven didn't reply. He hadn't replied to anything since Isstvan V. It was difficult to speak without a tongue.

The vox devolved into a choking mess of cries as he drew closer. Decades of listening to overlaying vox-chatter and deciphering the stream of runic updates on his eye-lenses stole the mystery of what he was about to see, but the majesty of the moment still struck hard.

Breathless, his armour scarred, Sevatar tore through into the fifteenth concourse – one of many thoroughfare hubs on the upper command decks. Dead serfs had decorated the tunnels on his way here, but the scale of the massacre taking place invited a rare laugh from his lips. Digital figures and flat-line readouts had nothing on the reality. The Atramentar and the Night Lords from the *Excoriator* were knee-deep in the dead, fighting amidst the piling bodies of serfs, servitors, armsmen, Dark Angels, and their own slain brothers. They fought back to back in diminishing circles, fighting to the last against a tide of Dark Angels reinforcements advancing from adjacent tunnels.

He'd never seen a weaker last stand, in a less defensible position, but the reason was clear enough. Here the primarchs had met, so here the battle raged. The two sons of the Emperor duelled above the warring crowds, above the crashing of bolters and the thwarted screeching of chainblades against ceramite. Their embattled children, screaming and bleeding and dying below them, were shadows in the wake of gods.

For the first time since Isstvan V, Sevatar saw his genetic forebear rise to reclaim the glory he'd once possessed in abundance. No one could ever claim Lord Konrad Curze was regal, nor could they describe him as handsome, dignified, or even healthy. His glory was starved and sickly; his majesty was cold and cadaverous.

Sickle-shaped silver claws scythed out from the tip of each armoured finger,

every one of them dancing with coruscating energy-lighting. He moved not as some avatar of liquid grace, but as a jerking puppet controlled by an unseen, malicious sentience, forcing this cadaverous god to dance to a tune inciting spasm over joy. Sevatar had seen several primarchs fight, shedding blood in anger, and their raw lethality was beautiful to behold. Each one of them flowed through the dance of war – even Angron, in his uncontrolled theatrics of tormented rage.

Curze did not share that trait. His movements were faster, jerkier stutters too swift for the eye to follow, between moments of unnerving serenity. Each heartbeat of calm lasted just long enough to convince the witness it was real, before the laughing murderer moved back into his twitching, killing paroxysm.

This was Sevatar's father as he'd been in the years after first taking the mantle of primarch. A creature of gaunt limbs, hollow cheeks, and sunken eyes, fuelled by some bleak energy brightening his gaze with the promise of dark fire. Lank black hair flowed across his shoulders, washed by the random spray of foes' blood and never anything more. His smile was a gruesome flourish of filed teeth between the whitest, thinnest lips. Sevatar had seen Curze fight Corax on the killing fields of the Dropsite Massacre, when the Raven Guard primarch was exhausted by hours of battle and drained by the infecting truth of betrayal. He'd seen his primarch duel the Lion twice – first in the dust of a fortress's foundations on distant Tsagualsa, and again only weeks before, fighting for less than sixty seconds in the rain of a world that held no value at all.

Here, for the first time, his father was locked in a fair fight. No low blows to begin with. No assaulting a weakened or demoralised foe. No attacking from surprise, with the gravity of a devastating ambush.

The Lion's movements were clinical, a ruthless economy of muscle and motion, each thrust and parry executed to perfection without the audacity of dramatic flair. Curze's jerked-string assault was a flailing of clawed hands, each potential embrace blocking the long blade one moment, and being turned aside by it the next.

It was the sound of Rushal's meteor hammer that dragged Sevatar back to himself, tearing his eyes away from the spark-shedding divinities trying to kill each other on the platform above. The Raven whirled his flail in a heavy, propeller-blade circle, idling in a *whoosh* of ionised air. Blood sizzled on the mace head hanging from the end of the chain, its energy field burning all gore away into foul-smelling steam.

The Raven pointed with his free hand. Warriors in armour as black as his own

were still running in from the twenty corridors opening out into this transit hub of hanging chains and raised gantries.

Sevatar vaulted a railing, dropping down another level, smashing boots-first into a melee in which several of his Terminator brothers were outnumbered by Dark Angels. The first foe went down, his head severed by a single sweep of the First Captain's chainglaive. The second lost a hand, then most of his face. The third and fourth dropped from being disembowelled in the same swing.

It was happening again. Was he faster than everyone else, or were they slower? Every enemy he faced betrayed themselves in the subtlest ways. He saw a tension in the joints of their armour – each one a premonition of where their next blow would come from. Sevatar blocked them all with the ease of a soldier seeing every strike coming, lashing back before they could retaliate.

It wasn't happening again; it was worse than ever before. Or… better? Lactic acid burned his muscles and the pressure behind his eyes threatened to break his skull from within, but each beat of his heart made everyone move slower and slower. He took a chainsword against the haft of his spear, and had time to spin, teeth clenched, to ram his glaive through the chest of a tabarded paladin behind him, before turning back to catch the first Dark Angel's next blow. As he did, he saw the minuscule adjustment in balance signifying the exact angle of his enemy's next attack. Sevatar impaled him before the move even began, standing face to face with the dying warrior as the chainglaive hewed its way through the other warrior's innards.

Blackness edged across his retinal display. It took several seconds to realise it wasn't blood in his helm, but a stain physically darkening his eyes. Something popped in his skull, something rupturing with a wet, bursting gush of fluid. His own life signs, scrawled across his eye-lens readout, twitched no differently from the primarch's jagged fury.

He could hear his brothers shouting his name now. They thought he'd been wounded, and he wasn't sure they were wrong.

Trez's warning scalded its way through his mind's eye, as if the words were written in fire upon flesh, rather than recalled through memory's voice.

This will probably kill you, Jago.

You have the strength for this. But not the control.

There's no going back from this. If you unlock the gift you've fought so hard to forget… Some doors cannot be closed.

He staggered, down to one knee, using the fall to cleave the legs out from the closest Dark Angel. The warrior cried out, dying a heartbeat later with Sevatar's

glaive through his chestplate.

I might be dying, he thought, and started laughing.

'Valzen!' someone was screaming. 'Valzen, Sevatar is down! Apothecary!'

He turned his head to see Rushal standing above him, a sentinel in absolute black. The Raven swung his meteor hammer, the arc ending in a burst of lethal light as it cracked the helm of yet another Dark Angel.

The warrior of the First Legion went down in silence, because everything was silent now. Rushal's meteor hammer no longer boomed with every impact. Sevatar's own erratic life signs no longer whined warnings at him. His world wasn't a chaotic storm of thudding boots, detonating bolt-rounds, and wrenching armour joints. It was, somehow, serene.

Sevatar vomited into his helm, forced to choke on his own bile because he couldn't stop laughing.

And then, he was home.

Home. The city at night. The rooftop where he came to hide.

The sunless world hadn't burned in his primarch's misguided, futile rage after all. He was home, standing in the promise of rain before the true storm, and the pressure in his head was just as it had always been as a child: threatening to bubble over into a fit that would leave him shaking.

Food, food, food, they called at him.

He turned to them, where they pecked at the rockcrete rooftop and fluttered their ragged feathers.

Boy, Boy, Boy, they cackled. *Food, food, food,* and *Now, now, now.*

Jago reached into his pockets, offering a handful of breadcrumbs. *Come,* he said to the crows. *Food for tonight.*

Flesh, flesh, flesh, they called back.

He laughed as several of the black birds landed on his shoulders and outstretched arm.

Flesh, he agreed. *Flesh soon. Breadcrumbs now.*

Flesh now, flesh now. He let them complain as they took the breadcrumbs, each chunk pebble-hard and stale.

Flesh now, he said to them once they were finished. *Wait.*

He wasn't gone long, but he was dizzy and sweating by the time he returned. Dragging the other boy's body up the stairs left his arms sore and stretched.

Flesh, flesh, flesh, the crows cawed.

Jago dropped the dead boy's ankles and sat down, catching his breath. *Flesh,*

he replied. *Save me some,* he said to the birds as they flocked down onto the corpse.

Yes, Boy, they kept cackling. *Yes, yes, yes. Save some for Boy.*

You can have the eyes, he told them. *I don't like the eyes.* They croaked crow laughter at this oldest of jokes between them. They knew the Boy never ate the eyes. He'd tried once, and the meal had made him see things. The Boy bled sweet man-blood from his nose and ears for hours, and slept all night, twitching on the stone.

Jago sat in silence while they ate, listening to the flutter of dark wings and enjoying the brush of mangy feathers against his cheeks. No other sound ever soothed him. No other feeling ever took away the headaches long enough for him to sleep.

EPILOGUE

Traitors

They'd thrown him into a cell, stripped of his weapons and armour. That was wise.

They'd incarcerated him with nine of his brothers. That was less wise.

Sevatar leaned back against the force wall, listening to the sound of his brothers' easy breathing, subsumed in part by the half-living pulse moving through the energy field all around them. The *Invincible Reason* was in the warp. Where they were going, Sevatar could only guess.

He knew Curze had brought almost seven hundred warriors from the *Excoriator* in his hasty and ill-advised assault. Var Jahan had been one of them. Perhaps his Kyroptera brother was held in another cell. He toyed with the notion of believing it, but he wasn't a soul ever given to blind hope.

They didn't have the primarch. That much, he knew for certain. His surviving brothers spoke of it – of the Dark Angels' final overwhelming assault – and Lord Curze at last realising the odds sweeping his sons into early graves.

He'd turned from the Lion in that moment, turned from the battle… and fled.

If Curze still lived, he was haunting the lower decks of the *Invincible Reason* even now. Perhaps he was coming to free his sons, but again, Sevatar wasn't one to hold out in the name of unrealistic hope.

He knew the fleet had run; Admiral Yul's plan had worked in part, at least. The fifty ships remaining behind had powered through the Dark Angels' wider formation with all the lethal efficiency of a needle lancing a boil. He'd seen at least half of them punch through to the other side, and he'd seen a handful starting to tear their way into the warp. But he knew nothing more. The *Excoriator* was probably destroyed. The *Nightfall* almost definitely was.

So Trez was dead, along with Taye. The former was a shame, for the primarch needed the little eater of dreams. The latter was a shame for the most irrational of reasons; one Sevatar wasn't comfortable admitting to any of his brothers, let alone the human maiden herself. He felt the same about four other mortals in

service to the Legion, and he monitored each of them with care for the very same reason.

Dwelling on long-dead family and their resemblance to living humans over a century later had its place, but this cell wasn't it. Besides, he didn't know for sure. They *might* be his blood-kin – the descendants of the cousins he left behind when he left Nostramo – but there was no way to know for sure. The world was an urban battlefield in the last century of its life, with a scavenging population keeping no civility or morality, let alone historical records. He couldn't shake the sense of connection with them, just as he couldn't shake how much they resembled the family he'd once known.

Sevatar pushed the melancholy thought aside with no real difficulty. He wasn't a doleful soul, just as he wasn't an optimistic one.

At least in captivity, Sevatar had time to plot, to muse, to process. The Thramas Crusade was over. Most of the VIII Legion had escaped, scattering to the solar winds. The bulk of the Night Lords would join the march on Terra, though he doubted many would ever stay at the front lines long enough to besiege the Throneworld. He sensed a great deal of raiding for plunder in the Legion's approaching future. The thought would've made him smile, if he'd been anywhere else but a Dark Angels containment cell, caged by a cube of shimmering force.

The first cell they'd thrown him into had been a more conventional trap of reinforced iron. Sevatar had spat his way through one wall in less than fifteen minutes, dissolving it with his acidic saliva. When a guard came to check on him, he'd merely pointed at the hissing hole in the wall, almost large enough for him to fit through.

'I think rats did it,' he'd said. 'Big ones.'

The Dark Angels had moved him from the cell, throwing him into a force cage with several of his brothers – each of whom had evidently ruined their own cells, just as he had.

Lacking the protection of armour to hide his augmentations from their eyes, Valzen was a wretched thing, more chrome and haemolubricant fluid than blood and bone.

'Stop staring at me,' he said to Sevatar. His one black eye narrowed, his bionic lens trying to tilt and adjust in weak mimicry.

'I was merely thinking,' the First Captain said, 'you are a testament to the Legion's refusal to obey anything or anyone. You were too stubborn even to die on Isstvan.'

Several of the others chuckled. Even Valzen offered a crooked sneer, the smile one-sided not from any wry charm, but because one side of his face was a stroke victim's bland visage.

'Why did you order us into this attack?' asked Tal Vanek. 'The Atramentar survived Isstvan, only to die to the last dozen in this suicidal madness?'

Sevatar raised a dark eyebrow. 'Is now really the time for petty recrimination?'

Tal Vanek grinned back, all teeth and wide, black eyes. 'Never a better time, Sev.'

'The primarch ordered this attack.'

Several of the warriors muttered in response. 'The primarch,' Tal Vanek replied, 'is a fool and a madman. Those who didn't know it before certainly see it now.'

This proclamation earned a general murmur of agreement. Sevatar had neither the patience nor the inclination to debate philosophy.

'We'll see,' was all he said.

The only one of them to remain silent the whole while was Rushal. The Raven's white skin, bare without his charcoal plate, was criss-crossed with dozens of aggravated scars – marks of excruciation, inflicted through torture, not earned in honest battle. He watched Sevatar from across the cell, his posture mirroring the First Captain's as they sat with their backs to the force screens.

Sevatar nodded to the Raven. 'I just realised I was wrong,' he said. 'I promised myself I wouldn't lose to the Angels twice.'

Rushal's scarred, split lips twisted into the ugly smile Sevatar's knives had left him.

'Sev,' one of his men said. 'Your nose is bleeding.'

He lifted a hand, feeling the trickle of hot blood against his fingers. 'So it is.'

'Are you all right?'

No. The secret I've kept for a century has just burst open, all because I couldn't resist a joyride in our father's psyche.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'Never better.'

'Your ear is bleeding, too.'

'It won't kill me. I think it may be time to escape soon,' he added.

'How do you plan to do that?' asked Valzen.

Sevatar looked at him for a moment, unsure if the question was sincere. Valzen looked blank, though whether it was because of his facial reconstruction stealing any expression, or simply a deadpan joke that Sevatar was missing, the captain couldn't say for certain.

‘Is that a real question?’ Sevatar asked at last.
‘Of course it is. How do we get out of here?’
‘The same way we do everything, brother. By killing whoever tries to stop us.’

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On sale November 2012

‘Come at me and die, traitors!’ the Imperial Fist yelled, his face a mask of blood from where Kroeger’s shot had torn a finger-deep furrow in his skull. Kroeger shook his head and shot him twice in the chest. Beside him, Ushtor collapsed, his armour blown outwards by the force of shell detonations. Kroeger ignored the dying warrior’s grunts of pain and loped towards the Imperial Fist who’d killed him.

Another warrior without a helm. Did Dorn’s weakling sons *want* their heads blown off?

The Fist backed away, ejecting his bolter’s magazine and slamming home a fresh clip.

‘Nowhere to run, little man,’ said Kroeger.

‘I’m not running,’ answered the Imperial Fist. ‘I’m waiting.’

Despite himself, Kroeger’s curiosity was aroused. ‘Waiting for what?’

‘For them,’ said the Fist.

Hammering impacts spun Kroger around, and he felt the pain of lacerating tears and holes punched in his side. He dropped to one knee, seeing at least two dozen Imperial Fists charging towards him. They fired from the hip, but suffered no loss in accuracy. Two more shells struck him before he could scramble to cover; one in the shoulder, one in the centre of his chest. Warning icons flashed to life on his visor, and he coughed a wad of blood through the vox-grille of his barbican helmet.

Kroeger fought to get off a last volley, but his arm hung uselessly at his side

and his bolter lay in pieces before him. He hadn’t even realised he’d lost the weapon. He looked over the edge of the wall, seeing only a handful of Iron Warriors clambering towards the rampart. Hundreds of mortal soldiers opposed them with explosives and massed fire. There would be no help from that quarter for now.

How demeaning to be kept out of a fortress by such dross.

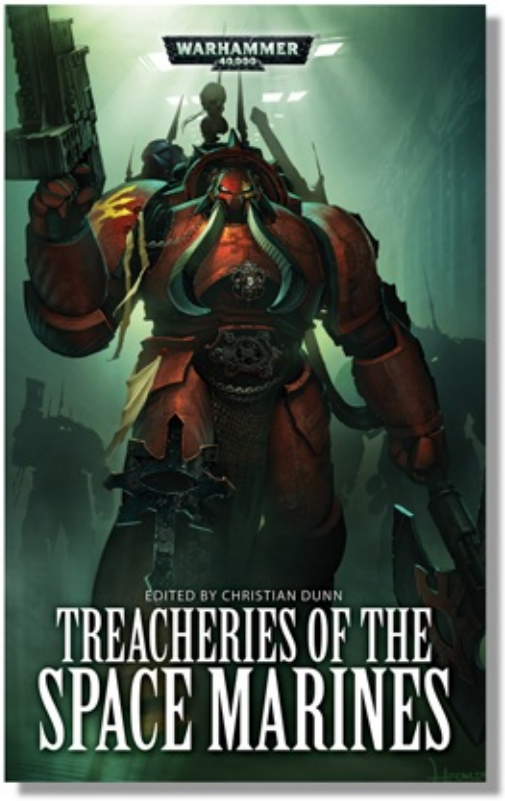
Kroeger stared down at the dark blood pooling in front of him, its bright gleam and iron tang curiously pleasant even as it leaked from his numerous wounds.

A cold shadow fell across the bloodied ramparts, and a roaring blast of jet-hot air blasted downwards from screaming retros. Kroeger’s spilled blood boiled in the heat and mortals screamed as their uniforms erupted in flames. The Imperial Fist with whom he’d traded words fell as the ammunition in his bolter exploded and transformed his wrists into charred stumps of flesh and nubs of fused bone.

Something fell from the sky, vast and iron, monstrous and cold.

It landed in the heart of the citadel with the booming clang of a funeral bell; the Olympian master of battle, a demigod in burnished warplate, a hammer-wielding avatar of thunder.

Perturabo, the Lord of Iron.



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